NAT BORDEN'S FIND

By ALLEN CHAPMAN

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NAT BORDEN'S FIND

Or

The Young Land Agent

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "THE HEROES OF THE SCHOOL," "NED WILDING'S DISAPPEARANCE," "FRANK ROSCOE'S SECRET," "FENN MASTERSON'S DISCOVERY," "BART KEENE'S HUNTING DAYS," ETC., ETC.

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NAT BORDEN'S FIND

CHAPTER I

SNOWBOUND

"I GUESS we are in for it, and no mistake."

"It looks that way."

"Wonder what they're stopping for now?"

"Can't some one find out when we are going to get to Pleasantville?"

"I will try and do that," said the first bright and energetic speaker, and, stepping from his seat, Nat Borden started down the aisle of the passenger coach.

Nat's accommodating action was the result of quite a long series of delays and uncertainties. He was one of a car full of belated passengers on their way to Pleasantville. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and the train had been due at

the terminus two hours since. A great snowstorm had come up about noon. The tracks had clogged heavily, and now, five miles from its destination, the train had struck a hopeless snowdrift.

There were tired mothers and peevish babies aboard. The coach was none too warm. One or two experienced traveling salesmen scared the timid ones by recounting the discomforts and perils of former occasions when they had been snowed in. The train would go ahead a little, and then stop suddenly with a jolt that grated on everybody's nerves. Whenever the whistle sounded shrilly, two old maids in a seat by themselves would grow pale and shudder, anticipating a general smash-up the next moment.

"Hold on a minute, will you?" directed the passenger who had spoken the request which had started Nat on his way to the head of the train.

"Yes, sir," said Nat.

He had noticed this passenger more than a little since the train had begun to meet with delays. He was an elderly gentleman who had got on at Springfield, and his dress and dignified manner impressed Nat with the idea that he was a person of some importance. For the past hour the man had acted fussy and nervous. He was constantly looking out of the window and consult-

ing his watch. Often, when there was a stop, he got up and paced the car from end to end, as if he was unable to curb his impatience.

Now, as he addressed Nat, detaining him by holding to his coat sleeve, he looked anxious and serious.

"It would be a great favor to me if you could find out just what the chances of getting to Pleasantville are," he said.

"I think I can do that for you," replied Nat. "I have a friend ahead who will probably know just how things stand."

"So have I," said the gentleman. "He's Stirling, the young express agent. Do you know him?"

"Bart Stirling?" said Nat, brightening up. "I should say I did! He is my great friend. Everybody knows Bart Stirling."

"Well, if you will kindly mention my name to him——"

"Yes, sir."

"It's Chase, Robert Chase, of Springfield—Stirling will remember it. I noticed him aboard when I got on the train. Just tell him that I am here, and that it's a matter of the greatest importance that I get to Pleasantville at once. If the train is going to be stalled here for any length

of time I must know it, so I can make other arrangements to reach town."

"That will be a pretty hard thing to do, I'm thinking," said Nat, with a meaning glance at the fast darkening landscape outside, veiled and indistinct through the falling snow.

"I've got to do it, all the same," declared Mr. Robert Chase, and the way he spoke convinced Nat that he was a pretty determined man.

Nat passed out of the car and swung from its platform to take a look ahead. When Nat had said that everybody knew Bart Stirling, he told the truth, at least so far as Pleasantville and its environs were concerned. Nat might have added that he himself was pretty well known, too. The young express agent was a self-made lad of whom Pleasantville was proud. He had been a model and an influence for Nat. The latter, although for the present simply a clerk in the Franklin department store of the village, had won golden opinions, through his industry and ambition, and was far started on the road to juvenile success.

"A dismal outlook, sure enough," decided Nat, glancing past the four first cars of the train. These were milk cars, taken up from a stalled train a distance down the road. There was no way of getting through them, so Nat jumped

down from the platform, landing in snow to his knees.

The train had halted at a little switch tower and stood at the edge of an embankment. There was only a foot or two of level space beyond the outer rail, Nat discovered. He found that he must adopt slow and cautious progress if he expected to reach the locomotive ahead without a slide or tumble.

Nat had lined the extending body of one car without a fall, when he stumbled over a loose ballast stone and took a header. To his surprise he landed, outstretched, on some yielding object. It proved to be the broad, spreading top of a great, high thorn-apple bush. This had a four-inch roof of snow, but as Nat scrambled over it this covering became dislodged. He felt himself falling again. First his feet and then his body passed through a network of snapping twigs, and he slid a sheltered incline and came to a halt with a bump. His feet struck some soft object. A distinct groan sounded, and Nat strained his sight, shivering a little at the obscure and somewhat uncanny situation in which he so unexpectedly found himself.

"What have I tumbled into, anyway?" the youth asked himself.

He soon found out. The top of the bush and its snow roof shut in quite a space, forming a kind of shelter or hide-out. Where the lower branches of the hawthorn extended on the level there was an open space, admitting daylight and allowing of egress. Near this smouldered a few wet chips and twigs. Lying flat on a riddled old blanket, his body up near to the fire, was the figure of a man wrapped in an old faded army overcoat.

There were some scraps of food beside the man. The whole layout suggested the camp of some tramp, housing himself as comfortably as he could from the lowering storm outside.

Nat's slide had brought his feet right up against the recumbent figure. The man had groaned at the contact. He was either asleep or sick. Nat arrived at the latter conclusion as he righted himself and got in front of him.

The man's face was thin and white. His countenance told that he was in great pain. His eyes were wide open, and he fixed them in a pathetic and helpless way on the intruder.

"What's the matter, mister?" asked Nat, a good deal shaken up and confused from his involuntary tumble and this strange surprise at the end of it.

The man tried to raise himself on one elbow,

but was so weak that his arm doubled up under him. His eyes closed with a wince of pain, and he groaned in a distressing way.

"Are you hurt—sick?" inquired Nat in a kindly tone.

"Very sick," answered the man faintly, and with an evident effort.

"Can't I help you in some way?" asked Nat, with genuine sympathy.

"I'm past help, I guess," responded the man. "I bunked in here when the storm came up, but I didn't have the strength to even keep up the fire. Yes, I'm done for," he concluded in a tone of despair.

"You mustn't say that," cried Nat, "with help and comfort right at hand. I suppose you feel bad because you've got chilled. Try and get up. There's a stalled train right up here on the roadbed. The cars are warm, and we'll soon reach Pleasantville, where you can see a doctor if you think you need him."

"Me!" said the man, and laughed outright. It was a hard, bitter laugh, and he added: "All that people like me have to do with trains is to ride on the bumpers or in an empty freight. Lad, you mean kindly, but if the fare was one cent I couldn't ride a foot."

"Don't fret about that," said Nat, in his impulsive, open-hearted way. "I'll see that your fare is paid. Why, I wouldn't leave a dog in this fix. You are going to ride if it takes every dollar I've got, and next month's salary in the bargain. Come, try and get up. You're pretty nearly perished, I can see that."

The man made an effort to rise, but it was no use. His knees bent under him, and he sank back with a hopeless sigh.

"You're bad off, for a fact," said Nat; "but we'll soon fix that. Don't get discouraged. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Nat scaled the embankment, broke his way through the top snow-laden branches of the hawthorn bush, and lined the milk cars till he came to the baggage car.

He passed through its platform doorway without ceremony and went straight up to a pleasant-faced, bright-eyed boy of his own age, who was looking over a register book at the express agent's desk.

"Hello, Nat," hailed the latter in a friendly tone. "Got tired of waiting in those humdrum cars?"

"Not exactly. I came with a message," re-

sponded Nat, "but—look here, there's a man starving and freezing to death back there."

"Where?" demanded Bart Stirling, and was instant attention.

Nat told of his discovery of the sick tramp. Bart's fine face showed interest and sympathy as he proceeded with the story.

"Why, this has got to be attended to at once," he said. "Look here, Tyler and Smith," hailed Bart, and the express messenger and his assistant, busy with some extra packages taken on from a stalled train back on the road, came forward promptly.

Bart Stirling did not belong to the crew of the train. He was on inspection duty, looking over the lines generally for the company, but the men he hailed knew and liked him, as did every decent and ambitious man in the express service.

A mere hint from Bart was enough to start the men into action, and as Nat at Bart's direction for the second time recited his story, they took up a folding canvas cot from the corner of the car and told Nat to lead the way to the rescue.

It was some work to get the helpless tramp to the roadbed and carried into the baggage car. When this was accomplished, however, they made

him fully comfortable. Nat pulled off his soaked shoes, and Bart covered him with a blanket. They set the cot right up against the stove, upon which the expressman's assistant placed his dinner pail. In a few minutes they were able to give the sufferer a strengthening drink of hot coffee.

The tramp settled back into comfort, and Nat proceeded to inform his railroad friend of his original mission.

"Why, yes, I know Mr. Chase," said Bart. "He did me a good turn when I got my first promotion in the express business, and is an old friend of my mother."

"He seems mighty anxious to get to Pleasantville," reported Nat. "What are the prospects, Bart?"

"The towerman says that there is a snowplow out. It should reach us inside of half an hour."

"Shall I tell Mr. Chase that?"

"Yes, and if there is any break in the calculation tell him I will come back and advise him," added Bart.

"All right," returned Nat, and started to leave the baggage car.

He paused to take a look at the tramp. His heart warmed as he contrasted the pleasant comfort of the forlorn refugee with his recent cheer-

less situation. The tramp had his eyes closed, however, and Nat did not disturb him, but made his way back to the passenger coach.

"Well, what are the prospects?" hailed Mr. Chase, as soon at Nat put in an appearance, and moving to make room for his messenger in the seat he occupied.

"Bart Stirling thinks we will make a move in about half an hour," explained Nat. "A snow-plow is on its way now from Pleasantville to dig us out."

"Half an hour?" repeated Mr. Chase, consulting his watch and evidently calculating some momentous matter in his mind. "Let me see, that would bring us into Pleasantville by six o'clock at the latest?"

"It ought to," responded Nat.

"It must," insisted Mr. Chase firmly, "or I must get there some other way, if I have to wade through the snow all the distance. Yes," he added in a lowered tone, communing with himself, "I'm bound to reach there in time to get the best of Colonel Harrington."

"Colonel Harrington!" repeated Nat Borden, under his breath, pricking up his ears with intense curiosity and interest at the mention of that familiar name.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS PACKAGE

Nat sat looking expectantly at Mr. Chase, but the latter did not satisfy his curiosity. After the audible allusion to Colonel Harrington he seemed engrossed in his own thoughts. Mr. Chase kept talking to himself. His head bobbed energetically. He slapped his breast pocket, which evidently contained some important documents.

"Unmitigated scoundrel!"

Nat caught the words and guessed that Mr. Chase's thoughts were not very pleasant ones.

"Trickster and cheat!"

The speaker brought his clenched fist down on his knee with force. Then he drew a large envelope from his pocket, took out some papers, and became absorbed in them, with the further muttered words:

"I'll teach the villain the lesson of his life!"

Nat comprehended that Mr. Chase referred to Colonel Harrington. Like Bart Stirling, that au-

gust individual was well known in Pleasantville. If the name of the young express agent was one to conjure with by every ambitious, up-to-date boy in the village, that of big, blustering, bullying Colonel Harrington was a red flag of warning and distrust to every one who had ever had business dealings with him.

Colonel Harrington was the magnate of Pleasantville. To judge from his bragging and puffed-up individuality, a stranger would have thought that he owned the town. He was rich but mean, influential but domineering, and his greatest pride was that he always got the best end of a bargain.

Nobody of Bart Stirling's crowd ever thought of the village magnate without thinking as well of Bart himself. There was a reason for this. The brave early struggles of Bart to support his mother, whom the colonel tried to rob of her humble homestead through a quirk of the law, had been blocked by this mean-souled enemy. When, however, Bart had courageously won his way to the top notch in the express service, it was Colonel Harrington whom he courteously but firmly moved out of his path, and the magnate never forgave him for the humiliation.

Those who have read a previous volume of this series, entitled "Bart Stirling's Road to Success,"

will recall the earnest upward and onward business career of Bart Stirling. He was placed in a position where he had to earn the living for the family, and he went into the express service with the resolve to make it the business of his life. Promotion after promotion demonstrated Bart's energy and ability, and he was now an inspector, declared by the great city superintendent to be the youngest and best man on the line.

Bart had set an example for other lads in Pleasantville, that two industrious young friends of his were not slow to follow. In another volume of this series, "Working Hard to Win," the trials and triumphs of Darry and Bob Haven have been related. Their fight with a fighting rival, their ability in building up a lively popular newspaper, showed the mettle of which they were made.

It was a good deal of satisfaction to the young express agent and the two young publishers when their business experience and success enabled them to be of help and service to others. In "Bound to Succeed," another book of this series, their advice and guidance led to the success of a resolute lad named Frank Newton, who, from a small beginning, built up an established business, em-

ploying many friends whom the generous-hearted Frank was glad to help.

One of these was Nelson Cady. A penitent runaway, he was hired first as a pedlar by Frank, and later entered the service of the department store operated by a Mr. Franklin. In the previous book of the career of these bright lads, entitled "The Young Storekeeper," the rapid advance of young Cady to a membership in the firm is depicted.

Nat Borden was a clerk in the Franklin store when Nelson Cady was given charge of the establishment. A fellow named Jack Ducro had been a sort of manager of the store during the absence of Mr. Franklin, who was an invalid. Ducro was a domineering tyrant who fairly crushed all the ambition out of his fellow clerks. When Nelson Cady took charge he found Nat a sulky, dissatisfied boy, with a brooding grievance that kept him miserable most of the time.

It did not take long for Nelson to unmask and discharge the treacherous Ducro. In quite as speedy a way he gained the confidence and friendship of Nat. All the latter needed was sympathy and encouragement, and his real sterling nature responded promptly to the genial, gentle influence of Nelson, whose runaway adventures had made

him truly appreciate respectability and a chance to make a man of himself.

In the volume preceding the present story Nat did some pretty big things. It was he who engineered a great advertising scheme in which a circus elephant and a band of music were attractive features. Nat, too, had helped head off the plots of a rival storekeeper to rob and burn out the Franklin store.

It was fairly remarkable to Nelson, Bart, the Haven boys, and in fact the entire better juvenile element of Pleasantville, the way that Nat forged to the front. At the time when this story opens, Nat had got about as high in the Franklin department store as he could go. He had developed into a first-class salesman. His success had awakened new ambitions in his enterprising nature, and his meeting with Mr. Chase was destined to be a new stepping-stone in his march of progress.

Nat had pricked up his ears considerably when Mr. Chase had alluded to Colonel Harrington. It was a strange thing, he reflected, as he sat impatiently waiting for his seat-mate to say something more on the subject, that the magnate of Pleasantville had played a conspicuous part in the career of every member of the group of boys who

had made their business mark in the village. His petty, shrewd tactics or open enmity had come into play all along the line.

Colonel Harrington had tried outright to rob Mrs. Stirling of her little home. His wife had attempted to get out of paying a bill for invitations to a grand reception, and Bob Haven had enforced its payment, dressed in his work clothes, appearing right in the midst of the fashionable friends of that indignant lady.

When Frank Newton was in the midst of his severest business struggles the colonel had tried to get the advantage of him in the matter of a lease, and Nelson Cady, in befriending a poor refugee whom the colonel had defrauded, had gone through an experience with the magnate in which the latter had displayed his usual sordid instincts and methods.

Nat's present interest in Colonel Harrington, however, had its origin way back as far as he could remember. Many a time his mother had pointed to a valuable strip of land near the river, used as a pasture by the colonel, telling her son that by rights it belonged to her. There were missing deeds, she said, and in a dreamy, boyish way Nat had reflected how some day he would

start a search for those deeds, and oust the scheming old tyrant, who never passed him on the street without a scowling look.

"I reckon Mr. Chase has forgotten all about me," decided Nat at last.

He got up and walked about the car, speaking to several persons he knew, and listening to the chatting of little groups deploring the delay and discomforts of the occasion. He was conversing with the brakeman when the front door of the coach opened, and the assistant of the express messenger beckoned to him.

"Hey, Borden," he hailed.

Nat followed him out on the platform.

"Want me?" he asked, with some curiosity.

"The man you found in the snowdrift does; Hastings, he says his name is."

"Is he any better?" inquired Nat.

"No, worse if anything," replied the man. "Stirling says he is in a bad fix, and that we want to get him to a hospital double quick. He has sinking spells and then spurts up a bit. Just now he got pretty nigh frantic wanting to see the boy who hauled him in out of the snowdrift, he says."

"All right, I'll go and see him," said Nat.

He followed the express man to the front car.

As he entered it the tramp on the cot espied him at once.

"That's him, that's the boy I want to see!" he cried excitedly, and as Nat came up to his side he seized his hand fervently.

Nat noticed that the touch of the fingers of the tramp was like fire. The poor fellow evidently had a high fever. His eyes were bright and glassy and his breath came in gasps.

"Say," he said, "what's your name?" and Nat told him.

"Nat Borden—Nat Borden," repeated the tramp over and over again. "It sounds good and solid, just like you strike me. These people here say I'm pretty sick."

"You will feel better when you rest up a bit," suggested Nat.

"No," dissented the tramp forcibly, "it'll be my long rest, I feel that. They're going to take me to the hospital at Pleasantville. Are you going to that town?"

"I live there," said Nat.

"I'm glad of that. You've been the kindest to me ever was, and I can't get you out of my mind."

"Don't try to," said Nat cheerfully, "and I'll

keep thinking of you, too. Maybe I can do something for you when you get well and strong again. Anyhow, I'll try and keep track of you."

"Will you?" exclaimed the tramp.

"I certainly shall."

"Will you come and see me at the hospital?"

"Yes," promised Nat.

The tramp was momentarily silent. His eyes closed and Nat fancied that he was relapsing into one of his weak spells.

Suddenly, however, the man opened his eyes with a wide stare, and whispered hoarsely:

"Nearer, lad, I don't want anybody but ourselves to know."

"What is it?" asked Nat, bending towards the cot.

"When I get to the hospital they'll take away my clothes. They always do, and I don't want them to find it. I don't want to lose it."

"Lose what?" inquired Nat.

"Put your hand inside my shirt on the left side. There's a little pocket there. Feel it?"

"Yes," answered Nat, his hand groping as directed, and coming across a little square package.

"It's pinned in. Pull the pins out. Got it? I'm glad—yes, I'm glad."

With a sigh of intense relief the tramp once

more sank back, apparently exhausted. Nat glanced with curiosity at the package in his hand. It was light of weight, enclosed in a strip of coarse canvas, and begrimed and wadded up as if it had been carried in the same place for a long time. He wondered what it contained, and could not fathom the whim or motive of the tramp.

"What do you want me to do with this?" he asked, and he had to repeat the question and even shake the arm of the sick man to rouse him up.

"Eh?" muttered the tramp confusedly, with a bewildered stare about him. "Oh, yes, you're Nat —Nat Borden. Good boy."

"But this package?"

"Oh, yes—say, be sure, now. Hide it, keep it till you come to see me at the hospital."

"All right," said Nat.

"If—if I should die, it's yours. You've been good to me—yes, good to me."

The speaker drifted off into his former lethargy, roused up, smiled at Nat, and said:

"Ten thousand dollars."

Nat wondered what he meant. The man began to mutter incoherently to himself. For several minutes his mind drifted. Then for the last time he opened his eyes, recognized Nat, smiled again at him, and said disconnectedly:

"It's yours if I die. Good boy. You was a friend to me. Ten thousand dollars. Remember, now, though—twenty feet from the old fence line."

Nat did not ponder much over the mystifying words spoken, for he did not attribute much importance then to the incoherency of the tramp. He sat by the man's side for a few minutes, watched the patient fall into a heavy troubled slumber, and went to where the express messenger stood.

"Where is Bart?" he inquired.

"He went back to the passenger coach just as you came in here," was explained.

"He must have taken the left side of the train then," said Nat. "What are the prospects for moving on?"

"Why, Stirling just came from the tower man. The snowplow broke down two miles out of Pleasantville, and we're stalled here for the night, I reckon."

"Whew!" whistled Nat animatedly; "I wonder what Mr. Chase will do now?"

CHAPTER III

LOST IN THE SNOW

NAT hurried back to the passenger coach. He surmised that Bart Stirling had preceded him, to notify the passengers of the tie-up of the train. Nat could fancy the discomfiture of Mr. Chase, and wondered what that resolute gentleman would do to carry out his statement that he was bound to get to Pleasantville at once.

As Nat entered the coach, he made out his friend Bart in the aisle explaining conditions to Mr. Chase. The latter was standing up and bustling about at a great rate. He looked flushed and excited.

"Train or no train, I've got to get to Pleasantville inside of the next two hours!" he almost shouted.

"That will be practically impossible, Mr. Chase," declared Bart. "The way things stand, we won't be able to get out of here before midnight. If sending a message by wire would help you out any——"

"Not a bit!" vociferated Mr. Chase. "I've got to be there in person. Oh, this is provoking! I only hope the snow is so deep in Pleasantville that old scoundrel Harrington can't wade through it, that's all. Hey you, young man!"

The speaker beckoned eagerly to Nat, whom he had noticed at that moment, and who came forward at once. Mr. Chase seemed glad to see him again.

"I suppose you know these roads around here pretty well?" asked Mr. Chase.

"Oh, yes, sir—I've been over them almost enough times to find my way in the dark," replied Nat.

"Well, it's getting dark right enough," put in Bart; "and as to the roads, there won't be any to be found if this snowstorm keeps up."

"Don't try to discourage me, Stirling," said Mr. Chase; and then he added suddenly to Nat: "Do you want to make ten dollars?"

"I'm always ready and glad to do that," said Nat.

"All right; take this satchel of mine while I get tucked up for a tramp, and then you make a bee-line for Pleasantville direct."

Nat was rather astonished at the direction.

Bart looked serious and anxious, and shook his head dubiously.

"See here, Mr. Chase," he observed; "you are a mighty good friend of mine, and I don't want to see you get into trouble."

"I'm trying to keep out of it. That's why I'm bound to get to Pleasantville," was the forcible reply.

"I see you are determined to go, sir," said Bart. "I'd join you, Mr. Chase, if it wasn't that I am on official duty, working out a tangle of delayed express matter. You want to make the try, Nat?"

"I'm willing," nodded Nat. "I think we can get through. The snow can't be so terribly deep, for it's been storming only since noon."

"Yes, but it's been coming down thick and fast all the time," suggested Bart. "I would advise that you go back the road to the last crossing."

"I was thinking of that," said Nat.

"There's a traversed road that cuts over to the old turnpike, where there is likely to be more travel than anywhere else in the storm."

"I know—been over it many times," said Nat.

"When you reach the turn you'll come to the Sollitt farm, about half a mile farther on."

"All right," tallied Nat.

"Sollitt has some fine horses. I think you could manage to make some kind of an arrangement to get a good team to take you to Pleasantville."

"Do just that, Borden," directed Mr. Chase. "Never mind the expense. I'm ready; come ahead."

Bart followed them to the platform and saw them off the train, shouting words of direction and encouragement after them, as they waded through the deep snow.

"Whew!" uttered Mr. Chase, as he paused, momentarily confused and breathless, in a great swirl of tempest.

He was a strong, well-preserved man of middle age, but heavily built and not much used to hardship. Nat piloted the way. It was better traveling when they took to the roadbed, but progress was exhaustive labor, even there.

"Think you can find the road Stirling told us about?" inquired Mr. Chase.

"Oh, yes. I see the sign-post just ahead;" and they soon reached it.

The highway was well sheltered for a distance on both sides with tall poplars, and the snow had not drifted much at that particular spot. Mr.

Chase was pleased and encouraged at this, and kept up a lively conversation.

"Stirling tells me you are clerking for Franklin & Cady," he said.

"Yes, sir; I've been there for two years," replied Nat.

"Like it?"

"I like Nelson Cady and the fellows working with us," replied Nat, "but I'm seriously thinking of trying my hand at something else."

"Oh, you are?"

"Yes, sir. They've treated us all right in the way of salary and all that, but I don't like inside work. Maybe it's just an idea, but I fancy that I would make a hit in trading and buying and selling in bigger things than calico and shoestrings."

"What, for instance?" inquired Nat's companion with genuine interest.

"Well, horses for one thing. I've had a little experience in that only yesterday and to-day."

"How was that?"

"Mr. Franklin has some old delivery horses and wagons, and intends using something better. On his orders I drove a double team down to Centerville, where there was a horse auction going on. I managed to trade the outfit for four

of the prettiest young horses you ever saw by throwing in a dry goods order. The horses are to be shipped to Pleasantville to-morrow, and I feel sure that Mr. Franklin will be pleased with the bargain."

"I see," nodded Mr. Chase. "Like outside work, eh?"

"So much so, that once I gave up my position at the store."

"What to do?"

"Well," explained Nat, rather sheepishly, "I tried reporting."

"Oh!"

"You know Darry and Bob Haven run the *Herald* at Pleasantville?"

"Yes, and a mighty big credit it is to those two enterprising fellows," said Mr. Chase.

"Well, they gave me all kinds of help to introduce me into journalism," went on Nat, "but I didn't seem to fit."

"Why not?"

"The printer got an informal reception and I wrote 'infernal reception.' Then I wrote up a wedding, or tried to. I had the bad taste to say in describing the departure of the bride and groom and their friends in the carriage, that all except the driver were well-known and respectable peo-

ple. The driver happened to be a relative of the bride, and came around the next day to settle it with the society reporter, but I had resigned in the meantime."

Mr. Chase laughed heartily at Nat's quaint recital of his journalistic mishaps. He was still chuckling over it when his glee changed abruptly to dismay. Nat, in the lead, turned quickly to discover his companion buried waist deep in the snow and floundering there.

"I've tumbled into some kind of a pit," explained Mr. Chase.

"No, it's a ditch," corrected Nat. "I can tell by the drift line. We're off the road, that's certain."

Nat stood stock still and took a sharp survey of their surroundings.

"Where are we?" asked Mr. Chase.

Nat shook his head dubiously.

"I thought I could go over any of these roads near the town blindfolded," he said; "but this snowstorm and the dark puzzle me."

"What are we going to do—you don't mean to say we have lost our way?" inquired Mr. Chase in an apprehensive tone.

"I'll soon find it again if we have," asserted Nat confidently. "Keep right on behind me, Mr.

Chase," he directed. "I think that big clump of bushes we see over there to the left is a turnpike landmark."

They had certainly wandered off from the road. It had grown quite dark by this time, and the falling snow blurred all distant outlines. The field they were traversing was rutty and treacherous, and twice Mr. Chase went headlong from a stumble, and Nat had to help him up.

"I declare!" puffed and panted Mr. Chase. "I had no idea it was as bad as this."

Nat discerned clearly that his companion was getting pretty well exhausted. He became anxious for Mr. Chase, and pretty serious over the general situation. Nat had lost all trace of familiar environment. By the time they had reached the line of bushes they had started for, Mr. Chase was fairly breathless.

"I can't go any farther," declared the latter. "I hate to say it, Borden, but I guess I will have to give up."

"Don't say that, Mr. Chase," replied Nat encouragingly. "There's some kind of shelter here —yes, it's a shed. No—only a shelter roof set against a haystack, but we can rest a bit and tackle it again."

Nat passed under the slanting boards of the

open structure beyond them. A rustling and a hoarse bellowing braying challenged him instanter.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "We've got company here, it seems."

"Who is it?"

"A mule."

Nat drew his companion into a corner of the shed, and investigated. He found that the mule had eaten its way into the haystack, forming a comfortable hollow. The animal was tied to one of the supporting timbers of the roof.

Nat did some thinking. Then, after a spell, he went out into the storm again and tried to scan the landscape for some directing landmark. None offered, and he came back into the shelter with the words:

"I think I see a way to arrive somewhere soon."

"That's good; I hope it's true," remarked Mr. Chase.

"Provided you could keep your seat on this animal here."

"I think I could. I was brought up on a farm."

"Then suppose you try it. I'll lead the animal, but will pretty much have to let him have his

own way. I feel pretty sure the mule will make tracks for the home stable."

"All right, but time is pretty precious to me, and we mustn't lose any of it in experiments."

Nat's plan proved a good one. The mule was old and pliant, and allowed Mr. Chase to bestride its back. The animal made clumsy but sure progress headed in one direction, as if through instinct, and kept to it and plodded steadily ahead.

"Good!" exclaimed Nat finally.

Mr. Chase resembled a snow man, and was so bundled up and hampered by the wet, clinging snow, that he did not attempt to raise his head, but inquired in a muffled tone:

"What is it, Borden?"

"A light. I'm pretty sure it's a farmhouse," responded Nat. "Yes," he added animatedly, "and it's the Sollitt farm. I can make out the hill with a lot of pines on it behind the house. This is luck, and we're all right now."

A few minutes later the mule landed them directly in front of a big barn. Nat helped Mr. Chase to alight, and they advanced to the kitchen at the rear of the farmhouse. Nat knocked, and the door opened promptly, and a big raw-boned

man, who Nat at once recognized, stared wonderingly at them.

"It's me, Nat Borden, Mr. Sollitt," announced Nat, shaking the snow from his shoulders and feet, "and this is Mr. Chase, from Springfield."

"Why, how did you get here? But come in, come in!" invited the farmer heartily.

Mr. Chase sank with a gasp of comfort and relief into an old-fashioned armchair beside the red-hot kitchen stove, while Nat tersely recited their experiences and necessities.

"Want to get to town, do ye?" observed Sollitt, stroking his chin and wagging his head thoughtfully. "I dunno about that, Nat."

"It will be a great favor to me, Mr. Sollitt," declared Nat.

"And you can charge any price you may think right," put in Mr. Chase eagerly.

"I've got a light bob-sled and about the likeliest team in the district," said the farmer, "but I don't like to tackle the job."

Mr. Chase arose and faced Sollitt persuasively.

"See here," he said; "if I am in town by six o'clock, well and good, it is worth almost any amount of money to me. I may as well tell you, that you will be helping the right along, not only

for me, but for the whole community at large, by getting me to Pleasantville on time. If I do not get there, Colonel Harrington will——"

"Who?" demanded Sollitt, with a start and a scowl.

"Colonel Harrington; of course, you know him?"

"I guess I do!" growled Sollitt, his face darkening. "He put my darter out of a school-teaching job to favor a relative of his wife. What's he to do with it?"

"Just this, Mr. Sollitt: he's trying to take advantage of information he has got hold of in a mean, underhanded way."

"Yes, that's him every time, the varmint!"

"If he succeeds, he will not only squeeze me, but the whole town."

"Sairey!" yelled the farmer, a resolute look on his grizzled face, and going over to a corner of the room where a lot of overcoats and buffalo robes were piled up.

His wife appeared at the call, smiled at Nat, whom she knew, and curtsied to Mr. Chase.

"Jest get up a little lunch and some piping hot coffee for the Squire and Nat, here," directed Sollitt. "Tell you, friend, you had only to say

what you did about that old skeesicks, Harrington, to set me on edge."

"You don't like him, eh?" queried Mr. Chase.

"Do you know anybody who does?" challenged the farmer.

"Well—scarcely," admitted Mr. Chase.

"Why!" vociferated Mr. Sollitt, "knowin' what I do, I'd lug you to Pleasantville all the way on my back, but I'd get you there. I'll be ready inside of five minutes to show you what them fine mares, Nance and Nell, can do in a snowstorm."

Mrs. Sollitt soon set out a lunch that both of her guests partook of with the rarest zest. Mr. Chase was pleased and animated like some schoolboy. Soon there was the cheery jingle of sleighbells out in the barnyard. The farmer stamped into the kitchen and carried out an armful of buffalo robes.

"Come on," he said; "I'm all ready for you."

Mr. Chase thanked Mrs. Sollitt warmly for her kind attentions. When they got outside, the farmer made him and Nat bundle up good and comfortable in the straw of the capacious bobsled.

"Brr-rr!" he hooted, as he posted himself in

the front seat and took up the lines. "This is some snowstorm. G'lang, there!"

Crack went the whip, and jingle, jingle echoed the sleigh bells, and Nat felt pretty sanguine that they would now reach Pleasantville in time to head off the plot of Colonel Harrington, whatever the new underhanded scheme of the village magnate might be.

CHAPTER IV

JUST IN TIME

It was five miles to Pleasantville, and Farmer Sollitt's splendid team made it in less than an hour. It was no easy traveling, but the sturdy old ruralite stood the brunt of the journey like a hero.

Well protected from snow and wind, Nat and Mr. Chase nestled comfortably in the straw. They could catch the frequent ejaculations of the driver, however, as the runners struck a rut, or one of the horses stumbled. Once there was nearly a tip over, but, aside from this, no serious mishap overtook them, and finally they reached the more sheltered streets of the town.

"We've made it, Squire!" shouted back Sollitt, easing up on the recking steeds, as they turned into a lighted business street of the village.

"I see you have," called out Mr. Chase cheerily; "and a famous trip you've made of it."

"Where exactly do you calkerlate to arrive, Squire?"

"Do you know the Central Block?"

"Like a book."

"That is where I want to go."

"We'll be there in a jiffy," promised Sollitt, and in a few minutes the team pulled up before the block in question.

Mr. Chase threw off the snow-laden buffalo robes, and jumped out. He landed in a snow heap, almost waist high, but he did not seem to mind it. Nat, following him, saw him glance anxiously and first of all up at the windows of the law firm of Davis & Townsley. The offices were lighted.

"It's all right," declared Mr. Chase with eager satisfaction. "Now, my friend."

He drew out a wallet with some difficulty, and, taking out a bank-note, tendered it to the farmer.

"What's that for?" challenged Sollitt.

"It's a twenty-dollar bill for your trouble," explained Mr. Chase, "and I'll make it fifty, if it's not enough."

"Not with me, you won't," declared Sollitt stubbornly. "You've bested Harrington, it seems. That's all I want out of the affair. I'm glad to do my share for nothing."

"I can't allow it to go that way," began Mr. Chase.

"You'll have to, that's all. It's a favor to Nat, likely, too. He got my boy a job, and I don't forget it. I'd pay money to do anything for Nat."

Mr. Chase persisted in his purpose. At last the obstinate old fellow agreed to a compromise.

"You're so pesterin'," he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take five dollars and buy a new pair of blankets for Nance and Nell."

"Very well," assented Mr. Chase. "They certainly deserve it. Here, Nat, I don't want to lose any more time. I haven't got a smaller bill than that twenty. Get it changed. Make him take more," whispered Mr. Chase, for Nat's ears only. Then he added aloud to the farmer: "I'll get even with you by sending a handsome present to Mrs. Sollitt."

"Wait a minute," said Nat to the farmer, and he went down the pavement to the nearest store to get the bill changed. "Hello!" he added, with a startling halt, staring at a cab which had just driven up in front of the Central Block.

Nat recognized it as a depot carriage on hire, which must have just met some belated train from the north. What attracted his attention most, was that a passenger alighted whom he at once recognized.

It was Colonel Harrington, big, pompous, and bustling as ever. He seemed to be in a terrific hurry. Just as Mr. Chase had done, he glanced up at the lighted windows in the second story of the building. His face showed satisfaction as he bolted up the open stairway leading from the street.

"Something lively on the programme going on up there, I wager that," reflected Nat, with excitement. "I want to get up to that office as quick as I can."

Nat changed the bill and hurried back to the sleigh, fully remembering the parting injunction of Mr. Chase.

"Here you are, Mr. Sollitt," he said, extending a bank-note all crumpled up.

The farmer put his great mittened hands behind him.

"No, you don't, Nat Borden," he observed. "Unroll that bill, and let me see how much it is before you try to pass it on me."

Nat did so, holding it in the light of the street lamp.

"H'm! thought you'd come it over me by making it ten, I see," observed Sollitt.

"It ought to be one hundred."

"Never you mind. Fish out a five—let me see

it first. Now, then, tuck it in my overcoat pocket. That'll do. I wouldn't take it, only I want to encourage them hosses."

"I hope you're satisfied now," said Nat, disposing of the bank-note as directed.

"I am, for a fact," grinned Sollitt; "but say, wasn't that old Harrington I just saw leaving a kerridge at the curb?"

"It was, Mr. Sollitt."

"And he bolted up the stairs to go where Mr. Chase is, hey?"

"It looks that way."

"Smash all hemlocks!" exclaimed the farmer in an animated way; "I'll bet there'll be a scrimmage. I'd give a good deal to see what's going on, but, seeing I hain't invited—good-by. Come out to the farm some Sunday, Nat, and tell us how it all comes out, will you?"

"I certainly shall," responded Nat.

"And get a good dinner."

"That's a foregone conclusion, when Mrs. Sollitt is on hand. Many thanks for all your trouble."

"Trouble—humph!" repeated the old farmer. "When I think about that stiddy job down at the Franklin store you got for Hiram——"

"Well, he made good, didn't he?"

"They tell me so, and he's proud as a peacock, and his ma's nearly tickled to death about it."

"Well, so am I," laughed Nat, "so we are happy all around. Good-by, Mr. Sollitt."

Nat made a bee-line for the entrance of the building into which Colonel Harrington had just disappeared. He knew the place well, for Darry and Bob Haven, and later Frank Newton, had had their offices in the third story of the Central Block. Nat reached the second floor, to be greeted by sounds of an animated discussion. The hall door of the law offices was ajar, and several persons stood around a table in the reception room. Conspicuous among them was the magnate of Pleasantville. With a smashing thump, he brought his great fist down on the table.

"It's a plot! It's a conspiracy!" he was yelling. "I'll have the law on somebody. You can't beat me out of my chance this way, Robert Chase!"

Nat felt that he had a right to be on hand as a witness to what was going on. He was both interested and curious. He glided through the doorway unobtrusively and sank into a chair set against the wall.

He had not expected it, but the minute red, per-

spiring Colonel Harrington caught sight of him, he glared at Nat, recognized him, and scowled frightfully.

"H'm! bringing in the whole town, it looks. What's your business here, Nat Borden?"

"His business is my business, Colonel Harrington," declared Mr. Chase. "He is one of the helpers under Providence who have made it possible for me to get to Pleasantville in time to baffle your game of spite and thievery."

"Thievery, hey?" shouted the magnate, furiously aroused. "That's actionable—I'll have you arrested! I'll—I'll—oh, to be beaten by you—and a boy!" and again he glared at Nat.

Mr. Chase was as cool as a cucumber. His calm, stern eyes made the magnate quail. Nat was glad to note that he acted like a man who had got a great load off his mind, and was satisfied and strongly entrenched in a safe position.

Mr. Chase paid no more attention to the wild outburst of the colonel and the prodigious menace of his great walloping fists than he would to the buzzing of a fly. He gave the magnate a minute or two to calm down. Then he said:

"Colonel Harrington, I have a few words to say to you, and then I am through with you."

"I want to hear no words from you!" stormed

the irate magnate. "I came here to bid on the Marvin land on the river. It was on the market, I heard."

"How did you come to hear of it, Colonel Harrington?" inquired Mr. Chase, with a slight smile.

"I—I saw it advertised," stammered the colonel, turning turkey-red.

"I beg your pardon, Colonel," here observed Mr. Davis, the lawyer, "but the land has not been advertised."

"Well, I found out about it, anyhow," blustered the magnate; "and I want it to patch out my holdings in North Pleasantville. I'm here in competition."

"You are too late, sir," said Davis, who did not like the colonel any too well.

"Why am I?"

"Because we have just sold the property to Mr. Chase."

The colonel showed his teeth, glared at Mr. Chase, and demanded:

"How much?"

"Thirty thousand dollars."

"I'll give you thirty-five."

"The sale is made, Colonel Harrington."

"Forty thousand dollars!" shouted the magnate.

"Mr. Chase has his receipt for the first payment," explained Mr. Davis, "and we cannot go back on our contract."

"Somebody shall suffer for this!" declared the colonel. "Do you know what I am going to do, Robert Chase?" he demanded, turning a furious face on the successful purchaser of the land.

"I do not, and, what is more, I don't care," responded the Springfield man bluntly. "I was legitimately the first bidder for this land. You knew nothing about it, and the heirs to the Marvin estate were glad to coöperate with me in a plan to open up a new subdivision. I had a traitor in my employ, I found, a clerk I have discharged, a tool of yours, Colonel Harrington, whom you bribed to watch my investments so you could take an underhanded advantage of my plans. He held back a letter I had written to the lawyers here, and telegraphed you to get to Pleasantville from the city, where you happened to be, and grab the land. I discharged the mean sneak, came on here, and have outwitted you, that's all."

Colonel Harrington shook all over in a towering rage. He made one or two threatening gestures, tried to speak, choked up, and then, shaking his fist, managed finally to blurt out:

"It will be a sorry hour for you and all connected with you the day you crossed my path. You're going to start the Riverview Land Company, eh? Well, I'll start a rival company. I'll undersell you; I'll block you at every turn. Every boom you get on at North Pleasantville, I'll dump in the ditch."

Mr. Chase merely laughed, meantime calmly folding up the precious receipt he held in his hand, thereby exasperating the furious magnate more and more.

"As to you," continued Colonel Harrington, turning to Nat, "I'll put you out of business mighty soon. Mark my words!" shouted the malicious schemer, "I've got a card up my sleeve about this land business that will make you squirm good and plenty."

And with these parting words, which, somehow or other, sounded ominous to Nat Borden, the mighty magnate of Pleasantville bounced out of the lawyer's office.

CHAPTER V

LOST

"You sit still, Borden," directed Mr. Chase, as Nat arose from his seat, somehow feeling himself in the way.

As he spoke, the Springfield man passed into the other office with the two lawyers. Nat sat listening to the echo of Colonel Harrington's departing footsteps. He now had a pretty good idea of what was going on, and it set him thinking.

Pleasantville had gone ahead in a substantial way during the past few years. It was a pretty big thing to say, but Nat had himself said it a good many times, that such boys as his young friends, the Havens, Frank Newton and Nelson Cady, had been considerably responsible for this progress. The Haven boys had reached the proud distinction of printing the leading newspaper in the county and one of the liveliest in the State. Mail Order Frank had built up a

business that now employed more than fifty persons. The supplies young Newton bought from the hardware factory at the edge of town had so increased its output that a new plant was being talked about.

The industry, therefore, of a few live, up-to-date boys of pluck, all business and ambition, had begun to burst the confines of old sleepy Pleasantville. For some time, not only the Havens, but Frank Newton and others had felt the need of mechanical expansion. Rents were high in the village, and it was difficult to find a new space, not only for increasing business demands, but as well for strangers whom industrial enterprise had brought to the place.

There had been a good deal of talk for six months or more of removals to what was known as North Pleasantville, where there was the nucleus of a new town. No one, however, had made an initial move. Every issue of the *Herald* boomed the prospective subdivision, and the local business men's association had held meetings encouraging the project. Now, Nat realized, an outsider, Mr. Chase, of Springfield, had made the first practical move toward starting the ball rolling.

Colonel Harrington never originated anything. He had proven himself on all occasions, however, a ready imitator, where there was a chance to make money or rob pioneers in a good movement of their prestige and gains. Nat foresaw trouble. The selfish magnate had announced his intention of breaking into the real estate field and starting a rival land company of his own. His threat of having a card up his sleeve disturbed Nat more than it had Mr. Chase. While Nat was thinking of all this, Mr. Chase himself appeared in the outer office of the suite and beckoned to him, with the words:

"Come on, Borden."

Nat followed Mr. Chase out of the office and down the stairs to the street.

"Here is the change from the twenty-dollar bill," he said, "fifteen dollars. Mr. Sollitt refused to take more than five dollars."

"Did, eh?" nodded Mr. Chase. "Well, you keep the balance, Borden. That squares us, I believe."

"It more than squares us, Mr. Chase," insisted Nat. "I don't feel that I have done much of anything."

"Oh, you don't?" spoke his companion satiri-

cally. "I suppose getting hold of a piece of property that is going to make me rich is nothing, as you call it!"

"You would have managed to get to Pleasantville if I hadn't been along," modestly declared Nat. "You're the kind of a man who knows how to find a way out of a difficulty."

"Thank you, Borden," said Mr. Chase. "I'm of the opinion, all the same, that if you hadn't been in evidence about the time we got lost in that snowstorm, my chances of reaching Pleasantville would have been pretty slim. I'm headed for the hotel. Where is the Washington House?"

"Two blocks ahead," answered Nat. "It's on my way home, and I'll go that way, if you have no objection."

"Let me see," spoke Mr. Chase as they went along, starting a new line of conversation, "you are working at the Franklin store, you told me?"

"Yes, sir," replied Nat.

"What do you get a week, Borden?"

"Nine dollars. There's generally extra work sorting stock, and I'm quite an expert window dresser, and I manage usually to make up to about forty-five dollars a month."

"That's pretty fair for a boy."

"I think so, too, sir; and especially where there's no carfare to pay, and a chance to go home to meals."

"Pretty well satisfied, are you?"

"In every way, so far as treatment is concerned. Of course, as I told you, I like outdoor work best."

"Just so. Well, I was talking to Stirling, and I asked the lawyers a few questions about you. Do you suppose you could get off from duty at the store for an hour or so to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Say about ten o'clock. I will be in my room at the hotel at that time, and I may have something interesting to say to you."

"I shall be glad to come, Mr. Chase."

"Very well—good-night."

It was only natural that Nat should speculate over what Mr. Chase had said to him. The land project was taking form and substance in his mind, and he had quite a glowing picture of what an enterprising boom in real estate might bring about, as he trudged homewards through the snow.

Mrs. Borden greeted her son with a smile of relief and satisfaction, and Nat was soon comfortable in a dry suit of clothes, and enjoying

one of the famous meals his mother knew so well how to get up.

He recited his experience in selling the horses for Mr. Franklin. Nat always found an interested listener in his mother to the minutest details of his doings and adventures. When he described his meeting with Mr. Chase on the train and the outcome of that acquaintanceship, her interest was intense.

"What a strange happening," she commented. "It has set me thinking, Nat, of something I have often spoken to you about."

"I know what you mean, mother," said Nat at once; "the strip of land along the river we once owned."

"Yes, Nat," assented Mrs. Borden. "The deeds were missing, we found, after the death of your father, and the land has ever since been used as a part of Colonel Harrington's dairy pasture."

"I remember what you have told me about the mysterious disappearance of those deeds, mother," said Nat reflectively.

"Yes, it was strange, indeed," said the widow, with a sigh. "We had a fire in the house here. It did not amount to much, but in the excitement a good many things were carried out onto the lawn.

When we came to replace them in the house, we found a small tin box, containing the deeds and some other papers and receipts, missing. A neighbor told of a tall, dark-featured man, a stranger, whom she had seen hanging around the garden."

"He must have taken the deeds," suggested Nat.

"I think so, too," acquiesced Mrs. Borden. "He probably carried off the box, found its contents of no value to him, and threw them away where we probably will never find them."

"Mother, do you think there is any way that we could prove that we had such deeds, and get hold of that strip of land by the river?" asked Nat earnestly.

"I fear not. Colonel Harrington denies that he ever deeded the land to your father, and unfortunately the documents were never recorded. Old Seth Crimmins was a witness to the deeds, but when I spoke to him about it he also disclaimed any remembrance of the transaction."

"Yes, and Crimmins is just as big a miser as Colonel Harrington is a scoundrel!" declared Nat hotly. "They are related, too, and they would stick together, hand and glove, on all occasions. There's just one thing: I'm going to look this

matter up thoroughly. Some day I'm going to start a hunt for those deeds or for some evidence as to our ownership of that land."

Mrs. Borden looked proudly but sadly at her son. She shook her head doubtingly.

"I do not think it will do any good, Nat," she said. "Colonel Harrington is rich and powerful. He is able to hedge himself in with strong influences. He is a revengeful man, too, Nat, and his ill-will is to be feared."

"Not by me," declared Nat sturdily. "You have taught me that right is might, mother. I shall go on that principle straight ahead, and I shall leave no stone unturned to expose this man's treachery."

Nat was pretty well tired out. He lay down on a couch to rest while his mother was busy tidying up the kitchen and dining room. Before he knew it, Nat drifted into slumberland.

"Heigh-ho! Here, this won't do at all," he shouted, bolting upright, rubbing his eyes, and staring at the clock. "Why, you have let me sleep nearly two hours."

"It will do you good, Nat," said his mother.

"Yes, but I had some things that needed attention. I intended to go down to the store and report to Nelson."

"That can surely wait until morning," suggested Mrs. Borden. "Besides, there won't be much travel on the streets a stormy night like this, and they will close the store early."

"There was something else," said Nat seriously, "and I've got to attend to it."

Nat had omitted telling his mother about the tramp he had rescued from the snow-blocked hideout near the stalled train. His promise to Hastings recurred to his mind.

Nearly every house in Pleasantville had a telephone, the Borden home among them. The competition of two rival companies had brought the rates down to a very small amount. Nat took up the receiver and called up Bart Stirling's house. He recognized the answering voice of the mother of the young express agent.

"Are you expecting Bart soon, Mrs. Stirling?" he asked.

"He just got in from the train," responded the lady. "I will call him."

"Hello!" challenged Bart at the other end of the phone a brief minute later; "that you, Nat?"

"Yes, Bart."

"Made town, did you?"

"Two hours since."

"Good for you. Was Mr. Chase in time?"

"Just in time."

"See me and tell me about it in the morning, for I'm interested. We just got in, and it was a hard tug, I tell you."

"Oh, Bart," said Nat, "I wanted to ask you about the tramp."

"We got him through all right, Nat," explained Bart; "but he's a pretty sick man. I telephoned for the ambulance myself, and saw him comfortably started for the hospital. The man in charge said the tramp was very low, and doubted if he would live. Poor fellow! It was pathetic the way he roused up and asked for you."

"I'm going to get to him right away," declared Nat. He bade his friend a hurried good-night, and went out into the kitchen.

Mrs. Borden had hung up to dry the suit he had worn through the snow. The various garments were spread across the backs of some chairs before the stove. Nat felt of them, found them rid of all dampness, and took up the coat.

His mind was full of the tramp now, and of the mysterious package he had entrusted to his care. Nat remembered stowing it in an outside pocket of the coat, and pulling the flap over it to protect it from the snow and to prevent it from falling out.

"Why," cried Nat, with an excited start, as he groped and groped in vain in the empty pocket, "the packet is lost!"

CHAPTER VI

JACK HARWELL

NAT was a good deal dismayed. He hurriedly searched in turn all the pockets in his discarded garments, but realized that it was wasted energy. He was positive as to the pocket in which he had bestowed the packet given to him by the man, Hastings, and now it was missing.

"What is it, Nat?" inquired his mother, who had overheard his excited words audibly spoken, and coming out into the kitchen.

"I forgot to tell you something, in my interest over that Harrington affair," explained the son, and then he recited in detail the story of the tramp he had rescued from the snowdrift.

"The packet may have shaken out of your pocket when I was arranging your coat to dry," suggested Mrs. Borden.

A thorough search, however, failed to reveal the missing packet. Nat looked and felt anxious and worried.

"Perhaps it was all some whim or fantasy of the poor man you tell about," remarked Mrs. Borden.

"I hope it is not of great importance," said Nat in a really disturbed way. "He seemed to place such confidence in me, mother; I must get on the track of that packet right away, and I must see the man at the hospital and tell him about it."

"But how can you hope to find the packet, Nat?" inquired Mrs. Borden. "You have traveled quite a distance since you got it."

"Yes, that's so," said Nat thoughtfully. "There was the helping Mr. Chase along, and bothering with the mule, and being knocked around in the sleigh. My opinion is that the packet slipped out of my pocket in the straw in the bob-sled. Yes, I feel sure of it, and I'm going to get word to the Sollitts right away."

The farmer had a telephone, Nat knew. He looked up the number and called central.

"What is it, Nat?" inquired his mother, as, after a brief exchange of conversation, the youth hung up the receiver.

"Out-of-town lines carried down with the heavy snow, the operator reports," explained Nat. "I must get word to Mr. Sollitt the first thing in the morning, though."

Nat resumed his old suit of clothes. His mother said nothing more. She knew Nat's resolute way when he was determined on a subject, and, besides that, she felt that his duty lay in visiting the unfortunate man at the hospital at once.

"I hope you won't be lonesome, mother," spoke Nat, as he buckled on his overshoes; "Jack will probably be home from the store in a few minutes."

Mrs. Borden changed color. She looked hesitatingly at her son, seemed to cogitate within herself, and then said:

"I did not want to worry you, Nat, but perhaps you had better know—Jack will not be home to-night."

"What is that?" exclaimed Nat in deep surprise.

"He is no longer working at the Franklin store. He left this morning, came home here, and started away for Springfield."

"What was the trouble, mother?" asked Nat.

"I don't think there was exactly any trouble," replied Mrs. Borden. "You know how restless and dissatisfied Jack has been ever since he came here."

"Yes, I know," nodded Nat.

"Your going away seemed to remind him of his constant longing for bigger work, as he put it, than clerking. At any rate, he came home, about nine o'clock this morning, changed his clothes, and told me he had got track of a better position. He said he would be back to-morrow morning at the latest to report to you."

"I am sorry he couldn't stick at the department store job," said Nat. "I think I had better be going, mother. That lost packet troubles me, and you know I promised this man Hastings that I would see him at the hospital."

"Go right along, Nat. I can put in the time reading till you return, but be careful of yourself, for it is a dangerous night outside."

In her motherly anxiety, Mrs. Borden followed Nat to the door, and shivered as a wild blast nearly swept her off her feet. Nat buckled down to a hard tramp. The storm had now reached the height of a veritable blizzard.

Nat got to thinking of the lad to whom his mother had just referred as he breasted the storm, wading knee deep in snow. Jack Harwell was a new arrival in Pleasantville, and had been a guest at the Borden home for two weeks.

Nat had felt a strong interest in Jack, for rather peculiar circumstances attended his coming

to Pleasantville. It seemed that his father, up to a few months previous, had conducted the leading jewelry store at Dover. His stock of goods represented a good many thousand dollars, and about all Mr. Harwell had was invested in the same and in cash in the big store safe.

Just one month before Christmas the Harwell store was visited by burglars. They blew open the safe, selected the most valuable jewelry, and escaped. They were discovered by the police leaving town, and a hot chase followed through two counties. The burglar party split up. One of them was followed as far as Pleasantville. He was wounded in a fight with an officer, but managed to elude his pursuer, and no later trace was found of either of the burglars.

The loss of his goods ruined Mr. Harwell financially. He was old and sickly, and sank under his misfortunes. Jack was called home from a military school he was attending, and his two sisters were obliged to seek work in the town where they had been social belles.

Nat's mother had been a girlhood friend of Mrs. Harwell, who wrote to her about a month before this story opens. She told that Jack was her principal anxiety. The loss of his father's fortune had been a terrible blow to a lad brought

up to every luxury. Jack, she said, was a good, lovable boy, but his first hard contact with the world had discouraged him. He was proud and ambitious, and he had been galled by the sneers of inferiors in his native village, who were mean-souled enough to be glad to see him obliged to work.

Nat took up the matter, went down to Dover, and had a talk with Jack. He had sufficient influence to get him a position in the Franklin store. Nat believed that amid new scenes and among strangers Jack would fall more naturally into working ways, but in this he found himself disappointed.

To Jack, the unusual inside confinement was most irksome. Besides that, he had always had his own way, and could not bear to be "bossed," as he termed it. Many a time he had told Nat that he intended to strike out on an independent course and be his own master. Nat, therefore, was disappointed, but not surprised, to learn that the boy to whom he had taken quite a liking, and to whom he had been a true friend, had made a new move.

It took Nat nearly a half an hour to reach the hospital. He was glad to stand in the sheltered vestibule of the building, when he finally

reached it, to catch his breath and to get the numbness out of his half-frozen fingers. When he finally rang the bell, old Jasper Bright, the hospital watchman, opened the inner door.

Nat knew old Jasper well, exchanged a friendly word with him, and asked if Dr. Meyers was to be seen.

"He just went into the office," said the watchman, and Nat, who had visited the hospital several times when a friend had been a patient there, knew the ways of the place, located the office, and entered through its open doorway.

Dr. Meyers was making an entry in a book at a desk. Nat waited until he had completed his task and had turned around.

"I came——" he began, when the doctor interrupted him by advancing with strange eagerness and seizing his hand.

"I have been thinking of you, Borden," he said, "and can guess what brought you here. It's about the poor fellow they brought in on the train two hours since."

"You mean the man they call Hastings?" asked Nat; "yes, that's it."

"It was almost pitiful the way he begged us to send for you," said Dr. Meyers. "He seemed to be under some great debt of gratitude to

you, and kept talking about your kindness. I had almost made up my mind to send for you, notwithstanding the storm, when it was too late."

"How do you mean too late, Dr. Meyers?" inquired Nat, with a sinking heart.

"The man is dead," replied the hospital physician.

CHAPTER VII

GETTING MYSTERIOUS

"Oh!" exclaimed Nat, terribly shocked by the unexpected intelligence.

"He was worn down to a shadow," explained the doctor. "If we had got him twelve hours sooner, we might have done something for him. but, as I say, it was too late. He was seized with a sudden chill, and it carried him off."

"Poor fellow!" spoke Nat, in genuine sorrow. "Then I can do nothing for him? Perhaps his friends——"

"I do not think he had any friends," replied Dr. Meyers. "He said that himself—except you. About the last words he spoke were your name and something about a packet."

"Yes, I know," nodded Nat in an anxious tone.

"He kept talking about restoring something and getting a reward. He, too, continually spoke about 'ten thousand dollars' and 'twenty feet from the fence'—I remember those last words particu-

larly, for he repeated them so often and they sounded so peculiar."

A nurse came for the doctor at that moment and engaged him in conversation. Then he was called to the telephone, and thus about fifteen minutes passed by. When the doctor finally had a little free leisure, Nat spoke to him again. Dr. Meyers told him that they would see to it that the poor unfortunate had decent burial, and Nat left the office, sad and serious over the strange episode, of which unexpected death had made a mystery.

He was a trifle surprised at the manner of the old watchman, whom he found in the vestibule staring out strangely through the outer glass doors.

"Well, there's a queer go!" spoke Bright, and he exhibited two silver dollars lying in the palm of his hand.

"What's that, Mr. Bright?" inquired Nat.

"Why, just after you came, a man, a stranger, came up to the door. He wouldn't come in, and said he wanted a little information and would pay for it, and placed this money in my hand. Then he asked me if a man named Hastings had been brought to the hospital this evening."

"How strange!" commented Nat, in an instant aroused to deep interest.

"I told him the man was dead. Then he asked me if he had said much of anything, and I told him nothing, except such incoherent talk as very sick patients sometimes use. Then he asked me particularly if we had found any papers or such like about the man. As I took away his clothes—they were so ragged I put them in the furnace at once—and as I searched them as we always do, I could answer that."

"Did you find anything?" asked Nat.

"Not so much as a pocket knife or a scrap of paper," replied the watchman. "The man who inquired seemed mightily relieved when I told him that Hastings was dead."

"Where did he go?"

"Back towards town. And in a big hurry, too, it looked. See there!"

The watchman half opened the door and pointed out. Nat strained his glance to follow the indication of the leveled finger. He made out a dim form struggling against the storm homewards.

"That's him," explained Bright, "and a hard-looking customer he is. He hasn't taken the

regular path, you see, and is cutting across the grounds to make short time to reach wherever he's aimed for."

"And that point I'm going to find out," declared Nat. "Thank you for the information, Mr. Bright. It may be very important."

Nat was a good deal stirred up at this new incident. He felt sure that some mystery attached to the visit of the stranger. Nat did not pursue him direct, however. He knew that by keeping to the regularly traversed paths he could overtake and maybe head off the stranger, if necessary.

By the time Nat had got clear of the hospital grounds and rounded them on one side, the stranger had reached the lighted street leading to the business center of the town. He was well done out with his battle with the snow, and he moved along as if his feet were hampered with leaden shoes. Nat, not so fully exhausted, was able to keep at an easy even distance behind him.

As the man paused under an arc light to shake the snow from his hat and coat, Nat discovered that he was a stranger to Pleasantville. His face and manner were not reassuring, and his pursuer was not at all surprised when the man he

was following turned down a street leading off toward the railroad depot given over to groggeries and boarding-houses of the lowest class.

"I can't go in there," decided Nat in some dismay, coming to a decided halt, as the man opened the door of a place known as Duffy's Retreat.

Looking through the front windows of the place, Nat saw the man he had followed pass into a back room. There was a side entrance to the place, and Nat ran around to this. Looking through the glass in the door, he made out two men, and one of them was the visitor to the hospital.

There was still another entrance at the side farther down the building—a short-cut entrance for customers from the railroad depot. The room beyond it was dark and untenanted at that hour of the night. Nat entered it, and stood stock still, as he distinctly heard voices in the next room, and could look through the archway connecting the two apartments.

The man who had visited the hospital had thrown open his overcoat, and was puffing and panting as he shook free the snow and kicked his feet on the floor. His face was drenched with perspiration from his recent unusual and arduous exertion.

"Well, you made it, did you, Perry?" spoke his companion, a flashily dressed man, also a complete stranger to Nat.

"Yes, and it was a killing jaunt, I tell you."

"Hey!" exclaimed the other, staring steadfastly at the face of the newcomer, "you needn't tell me that. It's easy to see that you're overheated—that old birthmark, the lobster, is red as red ink just now."

The man addressed as Perry quickly put his hand up to his right cheek. Then, as he took it away again, his face was turned toward Nat. The latter saw upon the cheek an outline, resembling a crab or lobster. It came and went, deepened and faded.

"You ought to grow a beard, or find some way to hide that tell-tale mark," again spoke the man at the table. "It will get you into trouble some day, I fear."

"Never you mind that," interrupted the other quickly, with a frown of annoyance. "About Hastings——"

"Yes."

"You were right. He is the man they took to the hospital."

"I hope you got a chance to talk with him."

"He's dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes, stone dead."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the other, and then with a look of satisfaction on his face, he added: "Then that makes it easy for us."

"There's no other way to look at it," declared Perry.

"Of course, you didn't get the paper?"

"There wasn't any to get. I pumped the watchman at the hospital. He said there wasn't a scrap of paper or anything else in the clothes of the dead man. It cost me two good silver dollars to find that out."

"Things are certainly our way, then, with the field clear. Now then, Perry, are you ready to go on with the proposition?"

"That's exactly what I'm here for, isn't it?"

"Exactly. I'll stake you up to five hundred dollars. All I ask is that you are square with me."

"Haven't I been always?" challenged the man called Perry.

"That is true, but there's a big temptation in this case. Come on, I think they can send the city train through. I'll get you the cash, and then you make your arrangements to come here and work that patch of land up the river. Better

get at it quick, too, for I understand as soon as this winter weather breaks up they're going to subdivide it and cut it up into lots."

"I heard of that," said Perry. "All right, I'm ready to go. Everything depends on our cue now."

"Yes," nodded the other; "twenty feet from the fence."

The men left the room. Nat went out into the street again. He was thoughtful, almost dazed. It was a complex and mysterious situation that he could not grasp all in a breath.

" 'The patch of land up the river'," repeated Nat to himself; " 'twenty feet from the fence.' What does it all mean?"

CHAPTER VIII

AN OLD-TIME ENEMY

"JUST think of it, Nelson—fifteen dollars a week!"

"Good for you."

"And a contract for a year."

"Better still."

"And a commission of five per cent. on the land I sell."

"Best of all. Nat, I declare, I see very plainly that you are bound to outstrip us all."

Nat Borden flushed up and looked proud and pleased. Nelson Cady was his best friend, had made a startling success as a business boy, and his praise was sweet to the ambitious, energetic lad following in his footsteps.

It was the Monday succeeding the severe snow-storm that had tied up the country for forty-eight hours. The snow had now gone, however, as quickly as it had come. A great thaw had set in, and the season was late enough to promise that

the rigors of winter were now fairly gone and spring on its way.

The past three or four days had been a period of magical happenings for Nat Borden. Affairs had developed in an exciting way, and now he was picking up the odds and ends of things, so to speak, preparatory to entering upon the grandest undertaking of his young life. His conversation with Nelson Cady had been brought about by a visit to the department store about noon. The two boys sat in the little office of the Franklin & Cady establishment. Nat was serious and all eagerness, and Nelson was smiling in a kindly, encouraging fashion.

"I don't know about outstripping anybody," said Nat; "but I do believe that I have the chance of my life offered to me. It seems like a dream, all that Mr. Chase has told me and done for me."

"A pretty pleasant dream, it appears to me," said Nelson. "It was bound to come, though, Nat. This town has got started on a big boom. It takes brains and energy to push it along, and those having the capital are looking out for the fellows who know how to handle the work. Naturally, you being one of the same, they pick you out."

"Thank you, Nelson. If I show any gumption, though, you gave me the start in that direction. I will never forget your kindness and patience when I was a trodden-down victim of that mean slave-driver, Jack Ducro."

"Well, Ducro is out of the game entirely now, and your perseverance has won its own reward," declared Nelson. "Fifteen dollars a week, eh?"

"Yes."

"A grand start. Tell us all about it, Nat."

"Well, Mr. Chase, as you know, got ahead of Colonel Harrington in purchasing the eighty-acre tract of the Marvin estate up the river. I helped to get him to town in time to circumvent the colonel. Bart Stirling spoke a good word for me, and the next morning Mr. Chase had me come to his hotel here."

"Yes, you told me about that," nodded Nelson; "and I guessed something fine was in the wind when you did so."

"Mr. Chase had it all blocked out what he would do."

"Open up a subdivision, I suppose?"

"Just that. He has a brother who did the same thing in the city and made a fortune out of it. Mr. Chase is a very liberal, broad-minded man. He knows that money makes money. He has

caught the city idea, and, as he says, is going to introduce up-to-date, metropolitan methods in selling this land. See here, Nelson," added Nat, somewhat anxiously, "I hope you don't feel hard against me for leaving the store."

"Never in the world!" said the young storekeeper with emphasis. "I'd be a pretty poor friend if I wasn't glad to see you making your way and bettering yourself."

"What does Mr. Franklin say?" said Nat, still more anxiously.

"He told me to give you a check for twenty-five dollars as an appreciation of your efforts in that last great Fire Sale scheme you originated, and to see that you had the best recommendation Franklin & Cady knew how to write."

"I declare!" said Nat in a choked-up tone, "it seems as if everybody in the world is trying to overwhelm me with kindness."

"There's only one thing, Nat," resumed Nelson. "Young Harwell leaving us, and you, too, puts us quite shy of average help in a rush. If you could drop in Wednesday afternoon this week when our special sale is on, and give us an hour or two Saturday night, it would be a big accommodation."

"You just count on me," said Nat with enthusi-

asm. "More than that, I can come every afternoon, if that is necessary. There is a lot of slow preliminary work at the start, as Mr. Chase told me, and I shall have quite some spare time for a week or two."

"You just give us a hand on the occasions I mentioned, Nat," said Nelson, "and it will answer famously."

"That's settled, then," said Nat. "Now, then, for a little real business, Nelson. I suppose your firm wouldn't object to a good-sized wholesale order?"

"Who from, Nat?"

"The Riverview Land Company."

"Meaning Mr. Chase and yourself, I presume?" smiled Nelson.

"Yes; very little of myself, though."

"Don't be modest, Nat. I clearly see you'll be pretty near the whole works in this proposition, the way you are starting in at it. What's the order, Nat?"

"Two hundred yards of canvas."

"What in the world are you going to do with all that cloth?"

"Make a tent."

"Oh, I see," nodded Nelson slowly.

"We are going to do this thing up in fine style,"

explained Nat. "It is going to be a regular educational campaign. There will be something like five hundred lots to sell, besides factory and store sites. Mr. Chase has had a survey made, and I have got the plats in the round parcel yonder. Next week we begin cutting in the streets. We propose to advertise very extensively, and have a tent large enough to accommodate a crowd. That isn't all," continued Nat, his eyes sparkling with animation; "Mr. Chase has told me to keep my wits alive, and jot down any suggestions and ideas I come across that may help in attracting attention to the subdivision or pushing sales."

"You're a born advertiser and promoter, Nat," declared Nelson, "that original fire sale showed that."

"Well, I've got free swing, and I'm dead in love with the scheme," said Nat. "Here's what we want—the lowest price on two hundred yards of canvas."

"Tent fixings included?" asked Nelson.

"Yes, if they are in your line."

"Everything is in our line where we can make a profit," laughed Nelson. "We have a connection at a city ship chandlery, where they keep all these fixings. We'll make our bid by to-morrow

night. Thanks for the order, Nat; it all helps along."

Nat took up the round parcel he had laid in the chair on entering the office of the department store, and nodded pleasantly to his former fellow clerks as he proceeded to the street. He felt considerably buoyed up. Things were certainly coming his way, and his new employment was a most congenial one. Nat loved outdoor work, and the confidence Mr. Chase had shown in him had put him on his mettle.

His head was full of his business as he started for the office of the *Herald*. Nat had not forgotten his friends, and he had a pleasant surprise for the staunch and loyal Haven brothers, Darry and Bob.

He was planning out such an advertising campaign as Pleasantville had never seen, when a sharp whistling and then the calling of his name, made him look around. Some one was slouching after him, having evidently hurried to overtake him from a side street. Nelson Cady had just made the remark that Jack Ducro was out of the game entirely, and here was the fellow Nat had not seen for months, Ducro himself, big as life, though mean looking and slovenly as ever.

"Hello, Jack Ducro," said Nat in an off-handed way, continuing his walk. "Back again, eh?"

"You see it, don't you?" retorted Ducro. "I've got a little business with you, Nat."

"I am surprised to hear you say it."

"Yes, I've a message. You know, I'm working for Colonel Harrington."

"I didn't know it," dissented Nat.

"Yes, I'm doing odd jobs up at his house. He told me to see you—confidentially like, understand?"

"Go on," directed Nat suspiciously.

"He wants to know if you'll come to his office —you know where it is, over the bank?"

"Yes, I know."

"Wants to see you for a few minutes. On very important business, he said. Will you come?"

Nat hesitated. He reflected for a minute or two—then he asked:

"What time?"

"Four o'clock, sharp."

"Yes, I'll come," said Nat.

CHAPTER IX

JOKE OR PLOT?

NAT was rather curious to know what Colonel Harrington might want of him, as he pursued his way to the Haven print shop. He did not care to have anything to do with the treacherous village magnate, but something enlightening might come out of the interview.

The colonel had sent a very disreputable messenger, Nat had decided, and he wondered that the magnate allowed such a character to hang about his place. In a way, however, Nat considered them birds of a feather. Thinking things over, Nat made up his mind that the sole object in the colonel's sending for him, was to try to scare him off or buy him off from going into the subdivision business with Mr. Chase.

"Perhaps the colonel is going to give me a glimpse of that 'card up his sleeve' he boasted about," thought Nat, with a smile. "At any rate, I'm not afraid of him. It will be only courteous

to respond to his kind invitation. I may pick up some points worth knowing, who can tell?"

Nat found both Darry and Bob Haven at the office of the *Herald* when he reached that place. They were figuring on quite a large contract for job printing for a new enterprise at Springfield, but both suspended work and greeted Nat with a warm welcome.

"I hear you have left the Franklin store, Nat," observed Darry.

"That's right," nodded Nat.

"And gone into partnership with some rich capitalist in the land business," put in Bob Haven.

"You're making fun of me," retorted Nat. "I'm just a sort of handy man on trial for Mr. Chase of Springfield. He has got the capital, all right, though, boys, and has given me a chance to invest some of it, and I thought I would come to you first to see if you still knew how to get out a good job of printing."

"Hear him, now!" rallied Bob good-naturedly; "five hundred dodgers, or something like that, eh, Nat?"

"Dodgers!" scoffed Nat. "We'll leave that to cheap schemes, like Colonel Harrington's. No, sir! the Riverview Land Company is going at it in a wholesale way. I've made out a kind of a

list of what we will want, just as a start, you see. Look it over, and give me an idea of what it will cost."

Nat took out a pretentious looking wallet, well stuffed with papers, selected a folded document and passed it to Darry.

"H'm," observed the latter; "I thought you said just a start."

"Some class to that order!" remarked Bob, peering over his brother's shoulder.

"Posters, circulars, envelopes, cards, special tickets, cotton signs—see here, young man," said Darry, "this is altogether too extensive a schedule to give an opinion on all at once."

"Oh, take your time," replied Nat. "See here," and he unrolled the plate he had just brought from the surveyor's, "this is a job you may have to send to the city, but I want you to take charge of it."

Their heads were now soon together, bobbing about in animated business discussion. Nat wanted a thousand quite large-sized plats of the subdivision, with reading matter above and below the plat.

"I suppose you'll have to get that engraved," he said.

"Oh, no," replied Darry, viewing the blue-print

with the eye of an expert, "we can do it all right here in the office, and make a fine job of it. It's rule work, and takes some time and patience, but we'll be able to turn it out all right."

"It is subject to change, but the size will be the same," explained Nat.

"I understand," nodded Darry. "We will let you have our figures by day after to-morrow."

"That will do finely," assented Nat. "What do you think of the layout?" he inquired, turning to Bob Haven, who had taken the blue-print from his brother's hands and was studying it critically.

"See here," said Bob, pointing out one corner of the plat, "that's the continuation of Main Street, isn't it?"

"Yes, if we make it so."

"What's the figure on it—two acres, I see."

"I can't tell you just now, Bob," replied Nat. "I think the price there is about five hundred dollars an acre. Thinking of settling down and buying a home?"

"The firm is," responded Bob quite seriously. "We've been crowded here for some time. I tell you, Darry, here's an ideal suggestion for us. No more crowded space and exorbitant rents. Plenty of room, and maybe a good speculation.

I tell you, Nat—no joking—when you get things in working order and can assure us a wire from the electric power plant to run our motors, and induce this rich boss of yours to put us up a building——"

"Anything more?" smiled Nat.

"Yes; two years' time on payments," continued Bob; "and I think that two-acre tract would just about suit us."

"What's the matter with getting Frank Newton into the same scheme?" spoke up Darry. "Nat, you get a few of the crowded industries camping on your eighty acres up there, and there will be a genuine rush to North Pleasantville."

Nat left his good friends still further encouraged. He next visited a carpenter. He was proceeding under instructions from Mr. Chase, had full power to act, and had thought out just what he wanted.

"Real estate office, eh?" questioned the carpenter. "That's your sketch?" he added interestedly, as Nat handed him a rude plan he had made of the structure under discussion. "You've done some neat work as to dimensions, Nat. What's the top all boarded around for?"

"We want to paint signs on all sides, so they will show to the trains and to boats on the river."

"Oh, yes, I see. I'll give you a rough figure, ten by twenty, cut into two rooms, about one hundred and fifty dollars."

"Well, get it down close," said Nat, "and let me know as soon as you can the exact figures. We want the work done right away."

"There's no trouble about that," said the carpenter, "for the building season has not started yet."

"We want a very lage sign made, too," said Nat. "It wants to face the road. Say, ten by forty feet. Figure that in, too, Mr. Mead."

"All right, Nat."

There was one more call Nat had to make. This was upon a contractor about cutting the streets through the new subdivision. It was ten minutes to four when Nat concluded an interesting interview with the contractor. He hurried his steps now, so as to be on time for his appointment with Colonel Harrington.

Nat felt pretty well satisfied with his afternoon's work. He had started things going, and, in his fancy as he walked along, he saw the new town booming up to great proportions.

There was still an echo of mystery in his mind of the eventful night he had met Mr. Chase on the train. Now, as very occasionally, Nat recalled

the packet he had lost in the snowstorm. He had telephoned Mr. Sollitt, and the farmer had made a thorough search of the shed and the straw that had been in it, but with no result.

This had considerably disappointed Nat. Whenever he thought of the man, Perry, and his overheard interview with the flashy stranger at Duffy's Retreat, Nat felt certain that the lost packet had some value, the "twenty feet from the fence" idea some tangible basis.

"They spoke about the land that was going to be subdivided," said Nat to himself now. "There may be some developments as time goes on. I should certainly know that man Perry and the lobster scar on his cheek if I ever saw them again. That mystery and the continued absence of Dick Harwell is about all that bothers me just now."

Nat reached the bank building in which the office of Colonel Harrington was located just as the town clock struck four. He ascended the stairs, found the door of the Harrington office open, and entered.

No one was in view, but the desk in one corner of the room was open. Nat decided that the colonel was probably in some other office in the building, and sat down to wait for him.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed away, and no one appeared. The long wait was becoming irksome to Nat. He arose and went out into the hall. As he did so, he discovered Colonel Harrington standing at the head of the stairs conversing with two men.

Nat approached them. The eyes of the colonel fell upon him, but gave no sign of recognition. Nat thought this strange. As there was a lull in the conversation Nat stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Colonel Harrington," he spoke politely, "shall I wait for you in your office?"

"Eh, what?" flared out the magnate, with a genuine or affected stare. "What for?"

"I've been waiting there for you to keep your appointment for fifteen minutes," said Nat.

"What appointment?" demanded the colonel, scowling.

"You sent for me, sir, and asked me to be at your office at four o'clock."

"I sent for you? Me?" cried the colonel derisively. "Well, you've got a fine lot of cheek. Send for you! Ha! ha! What is this—insolence or a joke?"

Nat fell back as the colonel turned around and resumed the conversation with his friends, completely ignoring him.

"Yes," he thought, "it must, indeed, be a joke. Jack Ducro has fooled me."

But why? As Nat, feeling indignant and embarrassed, started down the stairs, the colonel directed a sidelong glance at him. There was such a touch of sneering, triumphant malice in his eyes that Nat chilled.

"It means something," vehemently declared the young real estate agent as he reached the street. "It's a plot of some kind—I feel sure of it, and I want to look out for myself."

CHAPTER X

THE STOLEN WALLET

NAT was very busy during Tuesday. Wednesday Mr. Chase came over from Springfield and spent nearly all the day up at the subdivision with his young assistant.

Before he returned home, Nat took dinner with him at his hotel. Then until train time, which was about ten o'clock, Mr. Chase spent the time in his room going over the various plans and estimates that Nat had ready to submit to him.

"I am well pleased with your progress, Borden," said the capitalist heartily. "We want to get this campaign started just as soon as we can, so hurry up things the best you know how."

Nat promised to do this, and walked as far as the depot with his employer. Mr. Chase told him that he had important private business that would keep him at home until the latter part of the week, and went into a good deal of detail as to what Nat was to attend to during his absence.

"Things look pretty bright," Nat was telling himself, as he entered the gateway of the home yard, after a brisk walk. "Why, what is mother doing standing at the open door?"

"I am glad you have come, Nat," his mother greeted him, but in tremulous tones, and Nat noticed that she was pale and flustered.

"What is the matter, mother? You look frightened."

"I have been, somewhat," admitted Mrs. Borden. "I grew quite timid, and have been hoping you would come for the last hour."

"Why, what is this?" almost shouted Nat, as he came into the dining-room.

A scene of wreck and ruin greeted his sight, and he was immediately startled. One entire window was smashed out of place. Through it stuck the end of a ladder. This, in falling against the window from the outside, had littered the table and rug with shattered glass, splinters of wood and fragments of putty.

"I don't know how it happened," said Mrs. Borden. "I had turned down the only light in the house, that in the sitting-room, and was resting on the couch waiting for you to come home, when there was a terrific crash. I hurried to this room, whence it sounded. Then I was so fright-

ened I closed and locked the connecting door, and have been shivering in the cold ever since, waiting for you to come."

"I'll have to look into this," said Nat seriously, and he hastened to the kitchen and secured and lighted a lantern.

"I think some one was trying to burglarize the place," declared Nat, after an outside investigation.

"Is it possible?"

"I believe so. It looks as if some one lurking around fancied the inmates of the house absent or asleep, went to the shed, pulled the ladder down off the roof, and set it up against the house."

"I must have been dozing, for I heard no suspicious noises before the crash came," said Mrs. Borden.

"The burglar must have got aloft the ladder, set it up against one of the upper windows, when it slipped and gave the alarm and scared him away."

Nat went outside again and took a look about the place, but there were no further signs of the marauder. He boarded up the window, nailed a blanket over the aperture to shut out the cold,

and, after a desultory discussion of the startling event of the hour, went to bed.

Nat happened into the office of the *Herald* about noon the next day. Darry and Bob Haven had gone to dinner, it seemed, and Stet, the clever, ambitious urchin they had promoted from errand boy to copy-holder, was in charge. Stet lay down a paper he was reading to make notes of some printing instructions Nat had come in to leave. As Nat started to go, Stet pushed over across the table the paper he had been reading.

"Ever see the *Bugle*, Nat?" he inquired.

"Oh, you mean the paper Colonel Harrington is backing?"

"That's it," nodded Stet, with a wise grin. "It will run just long enough to boost old Harrington for the legislature—where he won't get. I see he's having his troubles, as usual."

"How is that?"

Stet folded over the paper to a certain place and pointed to a small advertisement.

"Oh, lost something, has he?" said Nat, noticing the headlines of the advertisement: "Stolen —Reward." Then Nat gave a start. The advertisement ran:

"Stolen—Reward. Stolen from a desk in my office last Monday afternoon, a new yellow

leather wallet, bearing the initial 'H.' and containing $100 and some valuable papers. Will pay $25 for the return of the property and no questions asked; $50 for the conviction of the thief."

Colonel Harrington's name was appended to the advertisement. Nat reread it slowly. Somehow he had a confused, warning feeling, similar to that conveyed the day mentioned in this very advertisement, when the magnate had bestowed upon him that triumphant and threatening look.

Nat passed a good day with Stet, and proceeded on his way with a vague sense of uneasiness. He did not like the looks of things. There was a missing pocketbook in question, and some circumstantial facts in connection with it that might eventually bring in his visit to the office of Colonel Harrington.

"I guess I'm too imaginative," decided Nat, after a spell of thought, in which he turned over in his mind all the details he could remember of his visit to the Colonel's office. "All the same, I can't help feeling there is trouble brewing, and that the Colonel is at the bottom of it. Well, nothing has hurt me so far, and I haven't any time to waste guessing at things."

Nat soon forgot all about the advertisement.

Those were busy day for the young embryo real estate agent. The carpenter had set at work on the great sign up at the subdivision, and lumber was being hauled for the little office building. Nat had to go up to the land often to look into the construction progress made. Then he had to interview the contractor engaged to cut the streets through the land. He was so tired when he got home that the mysterious attempt at burglary and the Colonel's stolen pocketbook were practically incidents of the past by this time.

Saturday noon, when Nat went home for dinner, Mrs. Borden had some further news for him about Jack Harwell. The boy had appeared just after breakfast. He was gloomy and haggard looking. Mrs. Borden tried to cheer him up, but Jack was dispirited and discouraged, he said.

Jack told that he had been at Springfield and had done some canvassing for a cut-glass house. He had been quite successful, and liked the business. The firm wanted to send him on the road, but demanded a cash deposit of $75 to cover samples. Of course Jack could not raise this, and he had come to Pleasantville on his way to his folks in Dover.

"I had quite persuaded Jack that you would

get him some work here," narrated Mrs. Borden. "He went upstairs to put on the suit you gave him, and I thought was going to spruce up and settle down to what work he could get in Pleasantville. He came downstairs in about ten minutes, greatly excited. He just said, 'Mrs. Borden, I've changed my mind. I think I'll go back to Springfield and try my luck again. I must hurry, too, for I know the conductor on the one-fifteen, and he'll carry me through for nothing.' Nat, I could not understand his strange change of mind and his great excitement."

Nat felt disappointed in his protégé. He recalled his own early vicissitudes when he first went to work, however, felt indulgent for Jack, and believed that after a few experiments young Harwell would get down to good common sense and start in at work in a true business way.

Saturday night found affairs at the subdivision finely progressed, and Nat experienced a decidedly satisfactory feeling as he settled down for the evening in the comfortable and cozy home sitting room.

"Mr. Chase went over the business with me to-day," Nat told his mother. "Next week, he says, we will begin in earnest. The weather is getting fine and settled. We are going to do our

first advertising, and I will open the office on the subdivision."

"I declare, Nat, it looks as if you were going to be a regular landed proprietor," rallied his mother.

"I shall certainly sell some lots, and soon, too," declared Nat. "The Haven boys are very much impressed with the idea of moving their plant to the subdivision, and Frank Newton is figuring on a three-acre tract. Mr. Chase says he is willing to build for them, if they will get a good guarantee for a ten years' lease, and I am sure that something will come from all their negotiations and figuring."

"That sounds very encouraging, Nat."

"Doesn't it, now?" asked Nat hopefully. "You see, mother, if some of the plants in and around Pleasantville locate with us, their employees will want to buy lots and build their homes nearby. Mr. Chase has asked me to figure out the cost of cottages on twenty-five-foot lots, to be sold on monthly installments."

"I am very proud of you for your manly, earnest industry, Nat," said Mrs. Borden, with genuine emotion.

"And I am very grateful to Mr. Chase and all

my good true friends for the big business boost they have given me," added Nat with earnestness.

Nat started to call for Darry Haven at nine o'clock the next morning, as they attended the same Sunday school. As he left the house, he noticed two men standing at the next corner.

Nat reached them, observing that they regarded him somewhat closely and queerly as he approached them. He recognized one of them as a constable attached to the court of Justice Bowen, and his companion as a man who collected bills for the same office. Nat nodded to the men pleasantly, and was about to pass on his way, when the constable stepped up to him and caught his arm.

"Wait a minute, Borden," he said. "I have some business with you."

"With me, Mr. Naylor?" asked Nat in some surprise.

"Yes, sorry to trouble you just at this time, but I have a paper to serve on you," and the constable drew a document from his pocket.

"What is it?" asked Nat.

"A warrant."

"A warrant!" exclaimed Nat in astonishment.

"Yes; for your arrest. Here, Tyler, you at-

tend to this one," and he handed a second paper to his companion, who immediately started away in the direction of the Borden home. "You'll have to come with me, Borden."

"Where?" demanded Nat.

"To the police station."

"You mean I am under arrest?"

"Just that, I am sorry to say."

"Why, this is preposterous!" cried Nat. "What is the charge—who accuses me?"

"Larceny of a pocketbook. Complainant, Colonel Harrington," explained the constable.

"Ah," said Nat, his eyes flashing with sudden intelligence, "I understand now!"

CHAPTER XI

UNDER ARREST

NAT was boiling over with indignation. In an instant he recalled his visit to the office of Colonel Harrington and subsequent happenings, and knew that he was the victim of a deliberate plot.

"See here——" he began, and then checked himself and walked on with the constable, for some people passing on the other side of the street were regarding them with curiosity.

"That's best," said the officer. "No need of making a scene on the public streets. Hold on, now!"

The constable put out a detaining hand as Nat made a bolt ahead. It was to hurry to meet his friend Darry, who reached the corner from a side street at that moment.

"Darry, I am arrested," announced Nat.

Darry nodded to the constable curtly. Being a "newspaper man," the young publisher knew a

good deal that was under the surface for average town people. The officer caught the look and bowed subserviently.

"Had to do it," he blurted out; "acting on orders."

"I can guess who from," declared Darry, with a quick flash in his eyes. "You have been a tool for Colonel Harrington before this, Naylor, and very nearly got into trouble."

"Yes; it is Colonel Harrington," flared up Nat. "They've picked out a nice time to try and disgrace me, haven't they?"

"I hope there'll be no trouble," said the officer. "Soon as we get to the station and my partner reports, we'll know all about it."

"Where has your partner gone?" demanded Nat suspiciously, glancing back of him, but the constable's assistant was no longer in sight.

"Search warrant," vouchsafed the officer.

"For whom? Where?" cried Nat, bristling up.

"Why, your house, of course," said the constable.

Nat let out a wild cry. Quick as a flash, he turned. The officer made a grab for him, but missed. If Darry, whose keen wits instantly seized the situation, had not grasped his arm and detained him, Nat would have shot down the

street like an arrow, and something exciting would have taken place.

"Hold on, Nat," advised Darry.

"What, you think I'll stand it!" stormed Nat. "You think I'll have my mother frightened out of her wits by the intrusion of that great hulking loafer Harrington has employed purposely to annoy me?"

"He'll not do anything out of the way," declared the constable. "I directed him to be gentlemanly; sure I did."

Darry prevailed upon Nat to go along with the constable, but his young friend fumed and fretted like a caged lion. They soon reached the police station.

"Ah!" cried Nat, the minute he entered the doorway of the building, "I thought this would be the programme."

As Nat had anticipated, Colonel Harrington was there waiting for him. He was accompanied by his lawyer, a Mr. Dale. Both got up from chairs in which they were seated as the constable led Nat up to the desk of the police sergeant.

"That's the boy," spoke the Colonel, somewhat unnecessarily, it seemed. "Have you searched him?"

"No," dissented the constable.

"Then do it now."

"Hold on," interrupted Darry Haven.

The boy publisher stepped between Nat and the magnate. There was a manly, determined look in his face.

"What you interfering for?" demanded Harrington, with a scowl.

"This boy is my friend, sir," returned Darry; "a true friend and a true boy, all the way through, and all of the time."

"H'm!" sniffed the colonel.

"Everybody in Pleasantville knows it," went on Darry; "you, as well as others. It's a pretty serious thing to accuse him of a crime."

"I do accuse him of it, all the same!" shouted the colonel.

"You have made mistakes before now, if my memory serves me right," said Darry.

"My pocketbook was stolen from my office desk last Monday afternoon," broke out the colonel. "I have evidence that the only person to visit it during my absence was Nat Borden."

"Why didn't you act on your evidence before?" challenged Darry.

"I—I wanted to give him a show to come up like a man and return the money," declared the colonel stumblingly.

"Ridiculous!"

"Search him, I say," insisted the colonel.

The sergeant came out from behind the railing, Nat flushed up, but he set his lips hard and allowed the officer to examine his pockets. The result was a few papers and a small amount of cash in his private pocketbook.

Colonel Harrington's face fell as neither his vaunted $100 nor the yellow wallet with his initial on it was brought to light.

"He's had time to spend it," spitefully charged the colonel.

Just at this moment the constable's assistant came rushing into the place.

"There you are!" he announced, slapping down an object upon the flat top of the railing.

"Aha!" fairly crowed Harrington, his eyes bulging gloatingly. "What did I tell you?" he demanded in triumph of his companion. "Yes, that's my pocketbook, and here," and he drew out some folded documents, "are my missing papers."

In his eagerness to prove his case, the colonel's clumsy fingers allowed some of the documents to fall to the floor. Darry picked one of them up. It had fallen open. He keenly noticed that while

it had a line of writing on its outside fold, the reverse side was dead blank.

"Here's one of your 'valuable' papers," he observed with emphasis.

"Valuable—yes, valuable memoranda," retorted Harrington, flushing up. "The money is gone," he continued, still further exploring the wallet. "But I expected that. Where did you find this pocketbook, officer?"

"Behind a box in the closet of this boy's bedroom."

"There is no box in my bedroom; neither has it a closet," said Nat. Then quickly he checked himself. These were both in the bedroom that Jack Harwell had occupied since he had been a guest at the Borden home. An anxious, puzzled expression came into Nat's face, and Darry observed it.

"I think this settles the case," spoke the colonel.

"You are bound to accuse my friend as a thief, are you?" inquired Darry.

"I guess I am!" retorted the magnate. "It isn't the hundred dollars I care about, it's the principle of the thing."

"All right," said Darry. "There are probably fifty first-class business men in Pleasantville who

will be glad to go on his bond. May I use the telephone, sergeant?"

"Certainly," answered the officer addressed.

"Meantime, you just shut up this criminal where he belongs," commanded Harrington, with a malicious glance at Nat's companion.

Nat looked worried and Darry distressed. Before the latter had reached the telephone, however, their emotions changed to surprise and expectation. The outside door had opened, and Jack Harwell came hurriedly up to the desk.

CHAPTER XII

A MEAN PLOT

Jack was pale and breathless. He shot a quick glance over the entire group. Then he addressed Nat.

"Have they arrested you?" he asked.

"Yes, Jack," answered Nat.

"For stealing that pocketbook?" inquired Jack, pointing at the bright new wallet now taken possession of by the sergeant.

"They say so."

"Who does?" challenged Jack.

"Colonel Harrington."

"It's a falsehood!"

Nat regarded Jack with some curiosity. Jack had never shown much force or spirit during his irksome engagement at the Franklin store. Now his attitude was almost heroic, and his face displayed earnest determination.

"Fine mannered set of hoodlums, aren't they, Dale?" spoke the colonel sneeringly to his lawyer.

"If anybody stole that pocketbook," continued Jack, "I'm the thief."

"What's that?" challenged the colonel, with a violent start.

"Nat never knew it was in the house," declared Jack staunchly. "Neither did I, till yesterday morning. Then I found it."

"Arrest him, too!" cried Harrington. "There's two of them in it."

"Can I tell my story?" asked Jack of the sergeant.

"If you choose to," nodded the officer.

"All right," said Jack. "I don't know how that wallet came into the house. I didn't know even to whom it belonged until I just returned to see Mrs. Borden."

"Tell that to the marines!" sneered Colonel Harrington.

"I came back from Springfield yesterday morning, intending to go home to my folks," proceeded Jack, paying no attention to the interruption. "I went up to my room to change my clothes that had hung in the closet for nearly a week. I put them on and happened to stick my hand in the inside pocket. I fished out this wallet."

"Where you put it, you bet!" sniffed the colonel.

"Why, say," demanded Jack, turning on his accuser, "how could I steal your wallet, when I hadn't been in Pleasantville for two days before the Monday you missed it?"

Colonel Harrington closed up like a clam.

"I'm telling the truth," declared Jack. "When I found that money I was so stunned, and yet excited, that I acted like a—a gump. I knew it wasn't Nat's; I knew of no one who could have touched my coat since I last wore it. Then I did a fool thing—yes, sir, a fool thing. I acted like a chump. I was dead blocked for want of seventy-five dollars to deposit with a Springfield house for a sample outfit. Here was one hundred dollars dropped right into my pocket. It belonged to nobody."

"It belonged to me!" roared Colonel Harrington.

"How was I to know that?" demanded Jack, with a smile, almost malicious, at the frenzied magnate. "I didn't stop to ask questions. I bolted for Springfield on a fool impulse. Before I got there, my common sense told me I had made a bad break. Getting to thinking, I saw plainly that I had no right to use that money. I came right back as soon as my railroad friend made his return trip. I just got here. Mrs.

Borden told me what was up. There's your money—if it is yours," said Jack, throwing a roll of bills at the feet of the amazed and crestfallen Colonel Harrington.

"There seems to be a comedy of errors here," observed Darry, with a cheery smile for Nat.

"That don't explain—no, it don't!" shouted Colonel Harrington. "You can't confuse me with any put-up plot to try and fool me."

"Colonel," quietly observed Lawyer Dale, "I think you had better drop this case."

"No, I won't——"

"There is no evidence against Borden," declared the attorney positively. "He seems a well-enough fellow——"

"Well enough won't do, in this case!" cried Nat. "Colonel Harrington, there is some deep plot under all this business, and I know it."

The magnate looked worried and flurried.

"Arrest or no arrest," declared Nat, "I shall find out what mystery lurks under this affair, if it takes me a whole year."

The lawyer drew the colonel to one side and whispered to him. Then he interviewed the sergeant. At the conclusion of these low-toned colloquies, the latter said to Nat:

"There is some mistake here, Borden. Least

said, soonest mended. The colonel has decided not to prosecute this case."

"He don't dare to," said Darry, deeply aroused. "But I shall investigate it."

Colonel Harrington almost sneaked from the place. Nat and his friends hurried to the Borden home at once. Nat found his mother anxious and troubled, but her face soon brightened when the entire story was told.

"It was a good thing I didn't deposit that seventy-five dollars," said Jack. "Coming back on the train I met a fellow who had worked for the firm I was going to work for. He said they were regular swindlers—didn't deliver the goods to customers they advertised, and an agent soon got sick of working for them."

"There's only one solution to this business," said Darry, after Nat had gone over every detail of his visit to the Harrington office and subsequent happenings. "Colonel Harrington hired Jack Ducro to help him in this business. Things were fixed so the colonel could reasonably claim a robbery. In my opinion, Ducro was the burglar who dropped that ladder through your dining-room window."

"Darry, do you really believe that?" exclaimed Nat.

"I do," answered the boy publisher definitely. "He put that wallet in the coat thinking it was yours—your Sunday coat. Don't it look like it, waiting to arrest you till you wore it—to-day?"

"I should think Colonel Harrington would hide his head in shame after this," observed Jack.

"Him?" derided Nat, well knowing the enemy he had to fear. "It will make him only the more determined to pay me off for baffling him."

"Yes," said Darry sapiently, "look out for more trouble, Nat."

The events of the morning naturally occupied the thoughts of those concerned throughout the entire day. Nat was surprised, and pleased too, at the effect they had upon Jack Harwell. They had stirred him up, seemed to give him an aroused interest in affairs. He appeared to have learned a lesson that did him good. When Nat talked to him about going to work at the first thing that came to his hand, instead of dreaming about grand positions that would come only with experience and training, he found Jack for the first time pliant and sensible.

Monday morning, just after breakfast, there was a ring at the telephone. Mrs. Borden answered the call.

"Somebody for you, Nat," she announced.

"For me?" said Nat, and went to the phone. "Hello—who is it?"

"Reporter Stet," came back the speedy reply.

"Graduated, eh? Thought you were copy-holder last I heard of you," laughed Nat.

"Oh, I advance myself whenever I get a chance. Just picked up an item. Fire up at the subdivision."

"When—where?"

"Late last night—your big advertising sign caught fire and burned down."

CHAPTER XIII

A MIDNIGHT MARAUDER

NAT made a dive for his coat and hat at the announcement over the telephone. The big sign had cost a great deal of money. It occurred to him that Mr. Chase would not consider that he had watched his property very well, and Nat looked worried and anxious as he rushed from the house.

"Hold on," challenged Jack Harwell, hastening after Nat. "Can I come along?"

"I will be glad to have you, Jack. I don't like this new trouble one bit."

"I shouldn't think you would. Things will come lively, though, when a fellow's hustling. What do you suppose—spark from a locomotive?"

"No; the sign is too far away from the railroad tracks for that. Some tramp may have started it."

They ran nearly all the way to the subdivision,

which was merely a brisk sprint for Nat. As they came in sight of the subdivision, he saw, sticking up, a blackened heap where the big sign had stood. The carpenter and his men had just arrived ready for the day's work, and were grouped about the ruins discussing the fire.

"This is a bad piece of work, Borden," hailed the carpenter, as Nat came up with his companion.

"Yes," nodded Nat. "How do you suppose it happened?"

"Set," declared the carpenter, with a positive bob of his head.

"You mean purposely?"

"Just that."

"Why——"

"Look here," and the carpenter led the way over to a half-burned plank. "See that wet on there? Kerosene. Smell of it. Kerosene. And that."

"Yes, kerosene," admitted Nat gravely, as he picked up a large dripping metal-can lying beside the board.

"What's the orders?" inquired the carpenter. "Shall I put all the men on the office shanty?"

"We've got to have a sign," said Nat, "but if some one is to burn it down as fast as we build it,

there won't be much use. It's a wonder they did not take the office, too."

"They did try it," declared the carpenter. "If you go over there, you'll see where some one heaped up a pile of chips and shavings. They set fire to the heap, but the flames only scorched the under rafters and went out."

Nat bustled about looking over things. He finally decided that the working force had better bulk their energies on the office building for the morning, and by noon-time he would have some new lumber on the grounds for the sign. Jack kept around with him. He manifested a great deal of interest in all that he saw.

"I say, Nat," he observed, as his friend was about to start for the town, "this business interests me mightily."

"Does it, Jack?"

"Yes, sir! Say, can't you give me something to do around here?"

Nat looked Jack over speculatively.

"See here, Jack," he observed, "if it was anybody but you, I would offer a job instanter."

"Then you need some one?"

"Badly."

"Why won't I do?"

"I think you will, if you would only buckle down

to hard work and give up your ideas of being a full-rounded business man made all in a minute."

"Oh, I'm through with that dream," insisted Jack.

"All right, then, here's the proposition: As Darry said, 'Look out for trouble.' Here's some of it now," and Nat pointed to the burned sign significantly. "There may be more coming."

"I know what you mean—whoever burned your sign did it out of malice and enmity."

"They certainly didn't do it out of any friendly spirit towards me," replied Nat.

"I can easily guess it was Colonel Harrington," said Jack.

"Hardly the colonel himself."

"Then it was some fellow he hired—that fellow Ducro, for instance."

"Whoever it was, we can't afford to have our efforts go up in smoke," declared Nat. "Some one has got to stay here nights. I must hire a watchman."

"Give me the position, Nat," pleaded Jack earnestly. "Never mind the pay till you see how well I can do. I'm wild to make a real business start at something."

"Very well," said Nat; "you're engaged. It

will be all right until I see Mr. Chase. If it isn't, I will pay you out of my own pocket. I have no doubt, though, that he will see how you can be useful to us permanently. You won't mind staying here alone nights, Jack?"

"Me!" cried Jack. "I'll like it. You leave it to me to fix it up so nobody will sneak in any more fires on us, Nat."

"You had better arrange, then, for your comfort, Jack. The nights are still a little chilly, you know. Go up to the house and get my mother to give you my old winter overcoat and a couple of comforters."

"Dandy!" enthused Jack. "I'll bunk in the office and be snug as a bug in a rug."

"Mother will wait breakfast for you in the morning," planned Nat. "Then you can sleep until afternoon, get an early supper, and be ready for duty when the workmen leave."

"Oh, I can put in a good part of the day here," declared Jack.

"Go down to the hardware store during the day," directed Nat, "and buy a good lantern. You had better get a good stout stick, too, Jack. If any lurkers or firebugs make us another visit, you want to be ready to defend yourself."

"You leave all that to me," advised Jack, with a look in his eyes as though he had some ideas of his own he was speculating over.

Jack went about his own devices after that, and Nat was busy flitting from the subdivision to the town all day long.

He was looking over some grading done by the road teams, when Jack came down the turnpike edging the subdivision on the west, a paper parcel sticking out of his pocket, and brisk and lively as a cricket.

"Here's your watchman, Nat!" he announced, with a cheery laugh.

"Ready to go on duty, eh?"

"You bet! Did you see how I've fixed up my little nest of comfort in the office?"

"I have been so busy I haven't been near the office since noon."

"Part of it is clapboarded," said Jack. "Come along, I want to show you how I've fixed things. I just had my supper, Nat. Your good mother made me bring along a midnight lunch," and Jack indicated the package sticking out of his pocket.

"I declare!" exclaimed Nat, as they got inside the little office building.

He was truly astonished. A narrow space had been partitioned off in the structure to store signs

in and the like. Here Jack had arranged some boards on blocks, so as to make a level, comfortable couch. On this he had spread the comforters. It was sheltered and cozy. The window, which commanded a view of the entire subdivision, had been boarded up loosely.

"You see, I can spy the enemy through those big cracks, if any enemy comes to be spied on," said Jack. "Then, if there's anything suspicious—bang!"

Nat regarded with astonishment an old-fashioned fowling-piece, which Jack produced from under his rudely improvised bed.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that?"

"Borrowed it from Farmer Williams, first house over beyond the turn in the creek. Glad to loan it to me, too, he said, for he has been bothered with tramps not a little. At the first shot, he declares he'll take the alarm and come hustling down here with his big stalwart sons and two bulldogs."

Nat had no misgivings as to the vigilance of his friend. When he came to the subdivision the next morning, he found Jack as cheery as a cricket.

"Nobody disturbed you?" questioned Nat.

"No," replied Jack, "but anybody bent on mis-

chief wouldn't be likely to put in an appearance two nights in succession, you see."

The following morning, however, when Nat reached the subdivision, Jack came running to meet him. From his excited face and manner, Nat anticipated that he had some startling intelligence to impart.

"Well?" queried Nat.

"Visit number two!"

"When?"

"Midnight. I heard a board tipped off the new lumber you ordered. Slipped out of the office, and saw a fellow who had just scraped up a heap of shavings against the lumber, light a match. He saw me and made a run for it. Then I fired."

Jack proudly spread out his hand to indicate a scattering explosion, but Nat looked serious.

"You don't mean that you fired at him?"

"Sure," nodded Jack tranquilly.

"And hit him?"

"I hope I did—in fact, I'm sure I did. I aimed right at his legs. He yelled, dropped, picked himself up, yelled some more, and put for the trees lining the pasture, where I lost sight of him."

"I don't know about this," said Nat gravely. "You might have crippled the fellow for life."

"Hardly that," disclaimed Jack, with a grin and a chuckle. "Only stung him up, good and sound. The old shotgun was loaded with salt and pepper."

CHAPTER XIV

STARTING IN BUSINESS

AFFAIRS went on quite serenely for the young real estate agent, the week succeeding the second attempt to burn them out at the new subdivision. Jack Harwell, however, kept up strict watch and ward over the spot.

Nat was delighted at the great interest his young friend and assistant took in the project. Jack was like a new boy. He had lost his unsettled, disappointed manner. He watched and talked about the rapidly progressing improvements on the tract with an enthusiasm greater than even that of Nat.

By the middle of the week the little office building was practically completed. All it needed now was two coats of paint on the outside, a flagpole and the proposed sign decorations.

Mr. Chase came over from Springfield Thursday morning. He had been busy attending to an important lawsuit. Nat met him at the Pleasantville depot with a borrowed rig, and noticed that

his employer brightened up with a great sigh of relief and pleasure as they spun along the broad highway leading to the subdivision.

"I declare, Borden," he confessed to Nat, "I feel like a boy let out of school—away from all my bothersome professional business. Heydey! but you've been doing some bustling work here," continued Mr. Chase, as they came in full sight of the subdivision.

Nat felt quite proud and pleased at the evident surprise and satisfaction of his employer. It was a beautiful, balmy spring day, and the pure air and gentle breeze and dazzling sunlight were enough to arouse any lover of nature. From the near distance the subdivision showed up well for the work so far bestowed upon it. The big sign had been replaced, the east and west streets had been cut through and graded, the grass had begun to sprout, and the entire place showed a neatness and regularity that caught the eye.

Jack stood at the door of the office shanty awaiting them. He looked excited and anxious. As he stepped aside for them to enter, Nat said:

"Mr. Chase, this is my young friend I wrote you about. His name is Jack Harwell."

"The Harwells of Dover—in the jewelry line?" asked Mr. Chase, with a shrewd glance at Jack.

"Yes, sir," answered Jack.

"I know your father quite well. Sorry for the trouble he had, though. A pretty hard blow, having all his means swept away in a single night. Honest, though, I offered to advance him new capital to start in business again, but he refused it. Said he wouldn't borrow of any man where he couldn't give security. Pretty badly broken up over his great loss. I don't wonder, and I hope you are going to help put him on his feet again some day, my son," added Mr. Chase, placing a kindly hand on Jack's shoulder.

"You—you are encouraging me more than you think by taking this notice of me," replied Jack in a choked tone. "Thank you, sir."

"Who fixed things up here this way?" inquired Mr. Chase, glancing with approval about the office.

"I varnished over the siding, sir," said Jack. "Makes it look like Georgia pine, and a good deal neater than the raw boards."

"Excellent," commented Mr. Chase. "Well, Borden, I expect we had better go into executive session at once, as I have another of those pestiferous legal engagements at Springfield this afternoon. Oh, dear!" and the speaker uttered a sigh of decided longing, "I only wish I was free to

devote all my time to this fascinating business here."

Jack had made a sort of table of some boards, and on this Mr. Chase spread out some papers, boxes answering for seats. Employer and assistant were soon deeply immersed in going over important details of the business in hand.

Jack felt that his place was outside on this occasion, and he wandered over to where the big scraper was gracefully rounding out the new roadway of Magnolia Avenue.

Nat had everything in full business order for his employer. He had orders executed, suggestions, plans, reports, all ready in clear and condensed form. Mr. Chase listened to him closely, approving, suggesting or disapproving each subject as it came up. He regarded Nat with approbation as the business on hand was disposed of.

"Borden, you're a jewel," said Mr. Chase warmly, "and I don't know how I could have got along without you, while I am so busily occupied with my affairs at Springfield. I don't see how I can do any better than leave everything here to your judgment and direction."

"I shall certainly do my level best," declared Nat.

"I know that. As to that charge of theft against you——"

"I have forgotten that."

"But I haven't," replied Mr. Chase, and the way he compressed his lips, and the resolute, stern expression in his eyes, told Nat that he meant every word he said. "See here, Borden, the outcome of that theft charge, and the burning of our sign, show me conclusively that Harrington is up to his old tricks. I am not content to let it rest there, and I want you to know it. However, I only ask you to use ordinary precautions in warding off the schemes of this man. I intend to follow him up in my own way."

There was a deep significance to this speech, but Nat did not ask any questions. A glance at Mr. Chase's determined face convinced the young real estate agent, however, that there was going to be trouble for Colonel Harrington.

Nat had Jack drive Mr. Chase back to the train, to get better acquainted with him, as Nat put it to himself. Jack came back excited and full of buoyancy.

"Mr. Chase is a fine man, Nat," he declared enthusiastically. "Why, he talked with me as freely as if we had been friends for years."

"He must have taken a fancy to you," suggested Nat.

"It's a new sensation to have people do that," declared Jack.

"May it not have been your own fault, Jack?" insinuated Nat gently. "No one can help but see your enthusiasm in this land business, and, of course, that is bound to please Mr. Chase. Did he talk to you about your position?"

"Why, no," answered Jack. "He just questioned me all about myself and my family. Am I to have a position, Nat?" pressed Jack anxiously.

"Do you know how to drive?"

"I think I do."

"Very well. Mr. Chase has authorized me to buy a horse and a carryall, and a light gig. We are to put up a rough shed-barn over near the river. Some one will have to attend to the rig."

"Make it me," voiced Jack earnestly.

"You see, the plan is to try and work up an interest in the subdivision in all the towns around there, so there will be some traveling to do."

"You mean circulars to give out, and posters to put up?"

"That will be part of the work. Then there will be people who have been solicited to invest, to meet at the trains and drive them out here."

"What delightful work!" said Jack.

"The position is yours, if you think you can handle it, Jack."

"Oh, just try me!"

"The pay is twenty dollars a month."

Jack's face was radiant. He was almost trembling with eagerness and satisfaction.

"There's another feature to it, Jack," proceeded Nat. "There's the commissions on land sales. You might do something that way."

"How much is the commission, Nat?"

"Two and a half per cent."

"Why!" cried Jack; "that would be two thousand five hundred dollars on a hundred thousand dollars. Say, I'll be rich!"

"Why don't you figure on a single lot sale at two hundred dollars, Jack, before you take such lofty flights?" intimated Nat, with a smile.

"Don't guy me, Nat Borden," said Jack soberly. "I know that I could have sold those cut-glass goods if they had been right, why not real estate?"

"Well, there's a grand try open for you," said Nat.

It took the young real estate agent a part of two days to buy the horse, carryall and gig which Mr. Chase had ordered. A temporary

barn was run up at a remote part of the subdivision, and Jack was put in charge.

That week the *Herald* came out with the first of a series of articles on the progress and prospects of Pleasantville. On another page was the first advertisement of the lots and other property for sale by the Riverview Land Co.

"Darry Haven just spread himself on that editorial," remarked Jack to Nat, "and if I had the cash, that advertisement would make me buy a lot before night."

"Yes, that end of our plan is in first-class hands," assented Nat. "We want to be on the look-out now, for returns may come in from the advertising at any time."

The advertisement described the property and gave prices and terms. The Haven boys had agreed to take a two-acre tract of the land, half cash, half to be paid for in printing and advertising.

Frank Newton was also a good prospective purchaser. He had helped Nat out, too, in a most practical way, by agreeing to have his office force sort out about two thousand addresses from his mail order list representing real estate owners all over the county.

The carryall was kept in pretty active service.

There were many things constantly needed by the workers on the subdivision, and daily trains to meet from two directions.

The third day after the advertisement was printed, Nat had just hoisted a keg of nails from the hardware store into the carryall, when the whistle of the south train reminded him that he might as well drop around by the depot on the chance of any prospective investors arriving,

The carryall had a neatly lettered banner on each side of it, reading: "All Aboard for North Pleasantville." The advertisements had described the vehicle and directed strangers to look out for it.

Nat heard the engine bell announce the arrival of the train while he was two blocks distant from the depot. He whipped up the horse, however, and made a short cut down a wretched second-class street just south of the depot to make time.

In the distance he saw passengers from the train crossing Main Street. One solitary traveler, however, a woman, was headed his way. Nat noticed that she was a stranger in Pleasantville. She carried an old-fashioned reticule, and was a fussy, old-fashioned looking person herself.

She was walking slowly along the deserted street as if confused, lost and seeking her way.

Nat had gotten within fifty yards of her, when suddenly out from between two buildings there darted a rushing form. It was that of a boy about the age of Nat. His face, purposely, as a disguise, or because of his occupation, was begrimed like that of a chimney sweep.

The newcomer ran against the woman, almost knocking her off her feet. Then with a deft grab he snatched the reticule from her hand.

The bold robber made a second spring, his booty secured. At a rattling pace he put for the crowded freight car sidings near at hand.

An old cobbler rushed out from a squalid little shop facing the street, having evidently noticed the robber.

"Stop, thief!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

The woman resumed her balance with difficulty. She adjusted her disarranged spectacles, stared in amazement at the fast disappearing culprit, and then, throwing both arms up into the air, she screamed wildly:

"Mercy me!"

CHAPTER XV

A COMPLIMENTARY CUSTOMER

"WHOA!"

Nat Borden brought the carryall horse to a quick halt. He discerned at once that the woman who had wandered outside of the depot precincts had fallen a victim to one of the many thieving loafers who infested this unsafe district.

Nat dropped the lines and described a quick spring. He reached the ground on a solid footing, and immediately put after the thief. Nat had retained the whip in his hand, because he had not found time to place it in its socket. This stood him in good service before the chase was over.

The fugitive was an agile runner. He was evidently well acquainted with the locality. He was making for the wilderness of freights just beyond the street. Nat realized that once he got in among them, a dozen tortuous windings and hiding places offered.

The thief gave out a gasp, as, turning his head

quickly, he made out his pursuer. He redoubled his pace, but Nat kept steadily after him. The thief dodged around the corner of the last box car of a train, ran under the next line of freights, and put across a clear space for the repair tracks. Here several men were at work. They suspended their labors, as Nat shouted loudly:

"Stop him! Head him off! He has stolen a lady's pocketbook!"

The robber at this whirled and shot off at a new tangent. The direction he had now taken was blocked by a moving freight, but he kept steadily on. He ran at the train in motion as if afraid of nothing, and, Nat directly at his heels, he gave a prodigious spring and caught at the fourth rung of a side iron ladder on a car.

As he did this, reckless of strain or peril, he flung out both feet. They nearly struck Nat. The fellow was nimble, and Nat knew he must not lose a foot of advantage in the chase. He continued to keep pace with car and passenger by running alongside. Then, observing a heap of ties in his forward path, he reversed suddenly, and made a strike at the free swinging hand of the fugitive which tenaciously clutched the reticule.

"Ow!" yelled the thief, and his fingers uncoiled as though seared with a red-hot iron. Nat

believed that his well-directed blow had numbed, if not cracked, the muscles in the back of the boy's hand. At all events, the reticule went tumbling to the ground. Nat paused to pick it up. The last he saw of the thief he was carried around a curve, still clinging to the car and viciously shaking his fist at his recent pursuer.

Nat was quite breathless as he came to the street again. The carryall stood where he had left it. The lady who had been robbed was seated on a doorstep, surrounded by the old cobbler and a group of curious people attracted to the spot by the excited little shoemaker. The latter was hopping about from foot to foot like a jumping-jack. Every once in a while he would remember the vivid scene that had so startled him. Then he would give a jump, and yell out:

"Stop, thief!"

"I have stopped him," reported Nat, approaching the group. They made way for him, and he reached the side of the lady, who was swaying to and fro, acting as if she was about to faint.

"Here is your property, madam," said Nat.

"Mercy me!" exclaimed the lady. "My reticule! Oh, you delightful boy! Give it to me, quick."

She almost grabbed the reticule from his hands,

and opened its clasp quickly. Nat ascribed this to eagerness to learn if she had sustained any loss. To his surprise he saw her hand grope past a great package of new green banknotes and documents, and fish out a bottle of smelling salts, which she immediately applied to her nostrils.

"There, that is better. Now I am all right," declared the queer lady, after one or two inhalations from the bottle. "You splendid boy!" she spoke to Nat, arising quite sprightly and smiling and nodding at him.

"You are a stranger in Pleasantville?" asked Nat courteously.

"Yes, indeed; and I don't like the way your town treats strangers," retorted the lady quite tartly.

"You unfortunately struck the only bad spot in it," Nat hastened to say. "Very few people come down this street, unless they have to."

"I hope I shall never have to again," said the lady. "Ugh! that horrid boy!" and she gave a shudder. Then her face suddenly became wreathed with smiles, and she added: "You beautiful boy! You saved my reticule, didn't you?"

Nat actually blushed at the fast-increasing compliments. He turned towards the carryall with the words:

"If you will tell me what part of the town you are bound for I will be pleased to take you there."

"Why, you are so obliging," said the lady. "I hardly know where I was bound for. This will tell you, though," and she opened her reticule. "Ah," finding a card, "that is me."

Nat lifted his cap and bowed in acknowledgment of the informal introduction, as he read upon the card, "Miss Tabitha Todd."

"Here it is," continued the lady, drawing out a folded newspaper clipping, "Riverview Land Company."

Nat felt highly pleased as there was outspread the half-page advertisement in the *Herald*.

"Then you wished to go to North Pleasantville," he said; "to the new subdivision?"

"Yes, I think that is the place. Anyhow, it is Mr. Chase's land—Mr. Chase, of Springfield."

"He is my employer," remarked Nat at once, and added quite proudly: "In fact, I represent his interests here."

"Do you, now?" said Miss Todd pleasantly. "Why, yes, there is the carriage I was looking for," and she glanced at the streamers on the sides of the carry-all. Nat led to way to the vehicle. He helped Miss Tabitha to its best cushioned seat, and took up the lines.

"Do you know Mr. Chase?" he inquired.

"Oh, dear, no. I read the advertisement, and his name was mentioned. I am thinking of changing my residence, besides looking for an investment, and that advertisement attracted me. I hope it says everything that's true about the place?"

"You shall see for yourself, Miss Todd," said Nat.

"I had my banker at Millville telephone his bank at Springfield, to find out if this Mr. Chase was a reliable man. They said he was to be trusted in every way, so I came down here at once."

"I am very glad you did, and the Riverview Land Company feels itself very greatly honored," said Nat. He was trying to make a good business impression, and was calm enough, to all semblance. His heart was beating high, however. Here was the first client. Everything looked favorable for the first sale of the young land agent.

The horse attached to the carry-all was a good one, and Nat put the animal through its best paces. He selected the finest business street, and, as they passed down its length, pointed out the principal buildings.

At the bank corner Nat experienced a decided

triumph. Standing on its steps was Colonel Harrington. As the carry-all flashed by, the magnate scowled darkly. Then his face fell as he saw a prospective customer in the back seat of the vehicle.

Nat drove down the best residence street of the town. When they reached the broad turnpike, he expatiated grandly on the character of the soil, on the pure air and high ground. He discoursed on the industrial features of the subdivision, and thought he was getting on swimmingly, when his shrewd-eyed spinster companion interrupted him with the words:

"That is all right, young man, and all very nice, but what about cats?"

CHAPTER XVI

NAT BORDEN'S FIRST SALE

"CATS," gasped Nat, lost in wonderment.

"Yes," nodded Miss Tabitha Todd vigorously; "that is what I asked you."

Nat's hopes began to fall. There could be but one solution to this astounding question of his passenger. This was that she was a decided eccentric, to say the least.

"About cats," ventured Nat, slowly and vaguely, "I would say that this would be an ideal spot for cats, ma'am."

"Do you like them?" demanded Miss Tabitha, fixing a piercing glance on Nat.

"I am very fond of all animals," responded Nat truthfully.

"I knew you were a kind-hearted boy by your looks and actions," said his companion. "I am glad you like cats. I love them. That's the reason why I am thinking of changing my residence."

"Yes, ma'am," said Nat, and waited for further explanations.

"I am a lonely old maid——"

"Oh, ma'am——"

"Don't try to flatter me, boy!" censured Miss Tabitha sharply. "Some people say I am a disagreeable old maid. That's because they don't like cats. I do. I am lonely, and I want company. When I settled at Millville, I wanted to be nice and sociable to everybody. They wouldn't have it, because I brought my pets with me."

"How many, ma'am?" inquired Nat.

"Twelve—beautiful angoras. People called me crazy, and said my cats were a nuisance. One day a man kicked one. Last week they poisoned two."

"That was mean," said Nat.

"It was very cruel," mourned Miss Tabitha. "What they didn't like was, that I ran a sort of hospital for outside cats. I couldn't bear to see the poor creatures abused. Whenever I heard of a starved, ill-used, or sick tabby, I paid boys to bring it to me. My place was small and next to two fashionable homes, and perhaps the cats did do some caterwauling. It wasn't half as bad as the girl next door, though, practicing grand opery at the top of her high, screeching voice."

"I see you are a kind-hearted lady," observed Nat. "If you should conclude to settle on the

subdivision, I hardly think anybody will object to a few cats. Here it is, Miss Todd," and Nat halted in front of the little office building.

He helped the visitor to alight, and took her over a part of the subdivision. The lady had eyes for everything, and listened attentively to all that Nat said. He was describing to her the special section where the better class of buildings would probably be located, when Miss Todd said:

"I believe all you tell me, and I think that an investment about here is sure to bring in good profits, but I must have a house to live in."

"Mr. Chase would probably build you one," said Nat.

"Oh, that would take all kinds of time, and make all kinds of fuss," declared the impatient little lady, and just then a new idea struck Nat.

"Miss Todd," he asked, "how large a house do you want?"

"I don't care for the size, so long as I get settled. I want lots of ground that I can fence in, and give my poor pets plenty of room to live in and annoy nobody."

"I think I have just the place for you," said Nat, and he led the way to the turnpike. Just beyond it, in the center of a two-acre lot, stood a pretentious-looking house.

"How would that suit you, Miss Todd?" asked Nat, pointing at it.

"I want to look a little closer."

"I hadn't thought of that place before," explained Nat. "You see, it really doesn't belong to the subdivision, but Mr. Chase had to take it to get the tract. It is the old Marvin homestead, and it is well built and comfortable."

"It is pretty large," said Miss Todd.

"There will be lots of chances to get roomers and boarders out here when the factories get moved," declared Nat.

"I wouldn't object to some real nice, well-behaved lady boarders—provided they liked cats," said Miss Todd.

Nat showed her over the place. His companion looked into every odd corner. She was thoughtful and silent when they went back to the office. Nat gave her the best seat there to rest.

"How much is the place?" inquired Miss Todd finally.

"The house cost four thousand dollars to build," said Nat; "but that was ten years ago. Mr. Chase has authorized me to offer it for three thousand dollars."

"Land and all?"

"Yes, Miss Todd."

"I'll take it."

Snap! Open came the reticule. It was quite startling, the quick decisions the impulsive, self-willed lady made. Open came her reticule, and out came a package of banknotes.

"I have only a thousand dollars with me," she said; "but I can give you a check for the balance."

Jack Harwell, standing in the doorway, fairly gasped. He had never dreamed of as easy a sale as this.

"Why—you don't understand," said Nat, "that it is not customary to close up a deal like this so suddenly."

"Why not?" announced Miss Todd snappily. "Haven't you got title to the land?"

"Oh, certainly."

"You aren't afraid of my check?"

"Oh, dear, no. If you will simply leave a deposit, say one hundred dollars, as an evidence of good faith, I will give you a receipt. That is the usual way. The abstract of title will be forwarded to your lawyer in a few days, and when you find it all right you can pay the remaining two thousand, nine hundred dollars, to Mr. Chase."

Miss Todd demurred grumblingly to all these

formalities, but finally submitted to the arrangement.

"Now, don't you go selling that place to somebody else, and disappoint me," warned the lady.

"Your receipt is good in law, Miss Todd," declared Nat. "We are too glad to have you for a neighbor to think of losing so good a client."

"You are a great flatterer, I fear, young man," said Miss Todd laughingly.

"Whew!" ejaculated Nat, as ten minutes later he bade his first customer good-by, and Jack started with her in the carry-all for the Pleasantville depot. "That was easy—and pleasant. Three thousand dollars, and all cash! Two and one-half per cent. commission, seventy-five dollars!"

Nat was not only satisfied but excited. He walked around the office feeling like a real, full-fledged real estate agent. He was dreaming of crowds of investors coming in just the same way, and was piling up extravagant commissions to his bank account, when Jack dashed into the office.

"Hi, hello, wake up, Nat!" he shouted. "I've something to tell you. First, though, say—that sale, cash, three thousand dollars."

"Pretty good for a start, hey, Jack?"

"Grand! famous! Why, it's a clear seventy-five dollars' commission."

"That's right, Jack," nodded Nat tranquilly.

"Wonder when my chance will come?" exclaimed Jack, almost enviously.

"Keep looking for it, Jack."

"You bet I will!" declared Jack, with vigor. "I'll make good. I feel it in my bones. Oh, say, Nat, as I said, I've got something to tell you."

"What about?"

"Harrington—Ducro."

"Hello!" commented Nat, with awakened interest.

"You know the little fellow, Barton, who works in the surveyor's office next to Harrington's?"

"I've seen him."

"He's quite a friend of mine, and he knows that Harrington doesn't like our crowd. I just gave him a lift on an errand he was doing, and it appears he has been watching the Harrington crowd. He told about Jack Ducro coming around the day after I peppered and salted that firebug up there. He said that Ducro looked pretty seedy and sad. He walked as if he had hot mush in his shoes."

"Which suggests?" insinuated Nat with a smile.

"That he got most of that load in the old musket. I think so, anyhow. About Harrington, though, say, Nat, that's serious."

"Is it, indeed?" inquired Nat.

"You'll say so. My little friend overheard some talk between the colonel and his lawyer. Nat, they're a pair of precious schemers, I tell you."

"Everybody knows that."

"And they've got us fixed—blockaded."

"In what way?"

"The subdivision here."

"Well?"

"From what my friend says, the colonel is going to play that 'card up his sleeve' he has boasted so much about."

"What is the card, Jack?"

"Just this: the colonel owns the pasture lot just behind us."

"He says he does—maybe," observed Nat significantly, "some day he may find that he doesn't."

"Is that so? Well, that lot is right between us and Pleasantville, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

"Colonel Harrington," announced Jack in a sort of breathless and scared way, "brags that before he allows Mr. Chase to cut his streets

through that pasture lot, he'll make him pay a fortune."

Nat Borden laughed good and heartily. He did not act a bit alarmed or excited.

"Why," cried Jack, "it doesn't seem to worry you!"

"I am sorry to spoil your big sensation, Jack," replied Nat quietly, "but Mr. Chase knows all about Colonel Harrington's scheme. I can't say anything more on the subject just now, but you just rest easy."

"Yes, but you don't seem to grasp the situation," said Jack. "If the colonel blocks our way to town——"

"He can't, and he won't, Jack," replied Nat. "In fact, when he begins his big game of bluff and blackmail, Mr. Chase is prepared to show him a trick worth two of his."

And with these words, confidently spoken, the young real estate agent started for home, highly satisfied with his day's work.

CHAPTER XVII

A NEW MYSTERY

"THERE, Nat Borden—I guess I'm not dreaming now!"

It was two mornings after Nat's famous first sale. The young land agent had found his assistant quite excitedly awaiting his coming when he arrived at the subdivision, somewhat earlier than usual.

Jack was bubbling over with animation. According to his story, the tract had experienced another mysterious visitation during the silent midnight hours. Jack claimed that about ten o'clock, as was his custom, he woke up, ate one of the famous lunch sandwiches kindly furnished by Mrs. Borden, and then went to the door of the little office building to look over the subdivision to see that everything was right.

"The minute I poked my head out the door, I poked it right in again," narrated Jack. "Then I went to the window and fixed my eyes on the man I had just seen."

"A man, eh? Another midnight marauder?" inquired Nat.

"I thought so at first, but I soon changed my mind. He was a bearded, ragged, queer-looking old customer. When I first saw him he was breaking a brick in two. There's one half of it down yonder where our land line ends. The other, as I showed you, he set right in line with the other at the road. He kicked them down into the soil like you would stakes. Then he began making these holes in the ground."

At "these holes" Nat was now looking, regarding them with considerable curiosity.

"Perfectly round," he remarked, in an interested way.

"And right in line, and all about two feet, an even distance, apart."

"That's so," nodded Nat, and fell to studying them anew. "What did the man make the holes with, Nat?"

"That's the queer part of it," explained Jack. "He had an iron rod about five feet long. It had an inside jigger of some kind. He would thrust the pointed end into the ground slantwise, then he would give a twist to a handle on the inside of the hollow tube, and pull it up and start in again."

"What next, Jack?" interrogated Nat.

"Nothing next. I watched the fellow for fully half an hour. Then I made up my mind to go out and ask him his business around here. I wanted to take the old shotgun with me, to sort of impress him, you know. It was under the couch where I'd shoved two heavy carpenter's chests out of the way. I had a time getting at the gun. When I did, and was ready to go outside, the man was gone.

"Rather a queer performance," said Nat.

"Figure it out?"

"No, I can't," said Jack.

"Neither can I. Suppose it's some crank; but what's his idea? You bet I'll keep a close watch out for him, for this thing bothers and mystifies me."

Amid the fast thronging duties of the day, the odd incident passed temporarily from the minds of the boys. Those were busy times at the subdivision, and every hour was well taken up.

Mr. Chase came from Springfield nearly every day now. He had secured a permanent room at the hotel, and this had become the town office of the Riverview Land Co.

The papers were full of the growing enterprise. Some five hundred posters, advertising its

advantages, had been put up about Pleasantville and its environs. The carryall made regular trips to the trains, and quite a number of people visited the subdivision.

Mr. Chase was principally occupied at his office in the hotel. He daily held interviews with men who were in business in the district, principally manufacturers. He was wise enough to realize that if he got factories to locate on his land, the employees would need homes. He was now working on this big end of the business, while Nat and Jack did their best to entertain visitors.

So far neither of the boys had made the direct sale of any property outside of the one to Miss Tabitha Todd. Nat, however, had half a dozen prospects in view, and Jack what he called "nibbles," and both felt hopeful and encouraged, and were fast learning the business.

The great event, the formal introduction of the subdivision to the public was what they were working for and up to. Saturday of the following week had been advertised far and wide as "opening day." The Riverview Land Co. had sent out circulars broadcast, inviting the entire community to visit the subdivision on that occasion.

Nat had charge of this feature, and his ex-

perience in getting up sales at the Franklin department store helped him greatly in his plans. The advertisement hinted at free refreshments for all visitors, an entertainment besides, and a welcome to old and young.

Nat had written to his old circus friend, Ned Procter, who was traveling with a show now performing in the Pleasantville circuit, and was still corresponding with him. Nelson Cady had promised the tent in a few days. The sensation of the day was North Pleasantville, and Nat felt that the project was rising on a great wave of popularity.

The second day after the appearance of the mysterious holes in the ground, Nat was inspecting some posts and lumber right at the south edge of the subdivision. This joined on to the pasture lot between the subdivision and the town. Nat was so absorbed in his thoughts and calculations that he did not notice the approach of two persons until they almost faced him.

Nat stiffened up a bit as he recognized Colonel Harrington and his lawyer.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BAFFLED ENEMY

THE Pleasantville magnate looked dark and ugly as usual. His companion nodded curtly to Nat, with the query:

"Chase anywhere about here?"

"Mr. Chase returned to Springfield on the noon train," replied Nat.

The lawyer glanced inquiringly at Harrington, who said:

"Give Borden the message."

"H'm, exactly, yes," mumbled Dale. "See here, Borden, Colonel Harrington wishes to send a message to your employer."

"Mr. Chase will be in Pleasantville at his office to-morrow," answered Nat.

"I'm not trailing around after Chase; not much!" growled Harrington, puffing up importantly. "You tell him to come and see me."

"Excuse me, Colonel Harrington," said Nat, firmly but politely, "but I do not think Mr. Chase cares to see you."

"Don't, eh?" snarled the magnate. "Maybe he'll change his mind a little later. See here, I serve him notice that the right of way from town through my pasture lot here, will be open for negotiation for just twenty-four hours from date, understand?"

As he spoke these words in a tone of malignant triumph, Nat knew that at last the colonel had played the boasted "card up his sleeve." But Nat was prepared for the occasion, and looked cool as a cucumber and innocent as a lamb.

"Right of way?" he repeated vaguely.

"Ya-as," drawled Harrington unpleasantly, "right of way. I suppose you know what that means? How do you people suppose you are going to get into your old rattletrap of a settlement unless you have a road to it?"

"That's so," said Nat.

"You've got to get through my pasture lot, haven't you? No other way. All right, you tell Chase that I'll give him two openings at——"

Harrington glanced at the lawyer. Dale winked solemnly as he filled in the words:

"Five thousand dollars apiece."

"And he'll take up the offer before to-morrow night, or we'll blockade him like a mouse in a trap!" gloated the magnate.

Colonel Harrington was quite disappointed, with all his braggart effrontery, to notice that, what he considered an astounding announcement, did not daunt the well-poised boy before him one particle. Nat never quailed at the overpowering gaze of the speaker.

"Colonel Harrington," he said quietly, "there is no necessity of my carrying your message to Mr. Chase."

"Hey! what's that—why not?" demanded Harrington.

"Because he anticipated just this attempt at extortion."

"Extortion, eh?" fired up the colonel.

"That is precisely the word, sir," insisted Nat. "Mr. Chase knew that you would make some unfriendly move. Well, sir, he has headed you off."

"Talking as his partner, I suppose?" sneered Harrington.

"No, sir," returned Nat; "but as his representative, yes. I am able and authorized fully to speak for my employer, because only yesterday we discussed this phase of the business in all its details."

Colonel Harrington glowered at Nat. The

lawyer surveyed him keenly, as if with all his shrewdness he scarcely knew how to take him.

"Mr. Chase," continued Nat, "wouldn't give five cents to get roads through your property. In fact, he doesn't want them at all. More than that, these posts and lumber are to be used to build a fence along the tract line clear from the turnpike to the road."

"W-what!" almost yelled Colonel Harrington, while his companion stood staring blankly at Nat.

"If you will observe, Colonel Harrington," resumed Nat coolly, "the streets of this subdivision have been cut through from east to west only. The stub end of the property with what houses we build will back on your land at this line, and the same way at the north end. The through turnpike is quite enough of an outlet from town for us. Shutting ourselves in in this way," added Nat, "Mr. Chase says, will give us a certain exclusiveness that will please our clients. Good day, gentlemen."

Nat had acted on orders. If he experienced a certain satisfaction in taking down the colonel a peg or two, it was only a natural feeling.

"Stop him—hey, look here!" spluttered Colonel Harrington, waving his cane frantically.

"Yes, sir?" questioned the young real estate agent, pausing.

"How—how am I to get through to my subdivision up north?" bellowed the colonel.

"Well, it will be a roundabout way, I will acknowledge," said Nat; "but you will have to take the turnpike road, as we do, or boat it up the river, I'm afraid."

"Dale, reason with him. Don't you see? They've got the bulge on me. Beaten by a boy!"

"Colonel Harrington is a trifle excited and unreasonable, Mr. Borden," the lawyer hastened to say in oily, specious tones. "You tell Mr. Chase that we will expect no such ridiculous price as that named by my client."

"It will be no use," declared Nat. "Mr. Chase, I am satisfied, has made up his mind firmly about this business, and cannot be induced to alter his decision."

Colonel Harrington let out a roar. He was a vivid expression of baffled fury. He waved his cane wildly. He bore down on Nat as if set on annihilating him then and there.

"You young scoundrel!" he shrieked. "You've blocked me out of spite, you've spoiled my land."

Nat never flinched. He looked the irate colonel squarely in the eye.

"Is it your land?" he challenged.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the magnate stormily.

"Just what I say," retorted Nat. "Is it your land, or—my mother's?"

Colonel Harrington wilted. He recoiled as though given a sudden blow.

"You—you—— I don't know what you mean," he stammered.

"Yes, you do," declared Nat. "You know perfectly well that if my mother had her rights, she would be the owner of this pasture lot."

With the words Nat turned and walked from the spot. He heard Colonel Harrington gasp out to the lawyer: "He knows too much!" and wondered if he had not made a bad move in showing his hand to the enemy.

"Prove it, you young scoundrel; prove it!" bellowed out the magnate after him.

"Yes, Colonel Harrington, some day I shall," retorted Nat. "I've started the ball rolling, or I've put my foot in it, bad," he reflected, as he walked towards the office. "Anyhow, I've made my boast. Now to prove, as the colonel says. How shall I begin?"

"Hello—this way!" hailed him in the tones of Jack Harwell.

His young assistant, standing at the rear of the office, was beckoning vigorously towards him.

"Nat," he said excitedly, as his friend approached him, "that fellow is back again!"

"What fellow?" inquired Nat.

"The man with the iron rod—there he is, over yonder."

CHAPTER XIX

"TWENTY FEET FROM THE FENCE"

"THAT's the man, is it?" asked Nat.

"Yes," replied Jack; "only he's a little wilder-acting than he was when I first saw him."

Nat took a good look at the stranger. It was near quitting time for the workmen. Only a small squad of them was dispersing over where they had been laying the board floor for the big tent. For all that, the man whom the boys now watched might reasonably be inspired with the idea that he was not under inspection. Something, however, that he could not explain, made Nat regard him with suspicion. After studying him for a minute or two, he observed to his companion:

"That man is either a harmless crank, or he is playing to the gallery for some purpose."

"What purpose can it be?"

"I don't know," replied Nat; "but I am going to find out."

The person upon whom the interest of the young land agent was now centered was an odd-looking individual. He was all that Jack had said—queer. In his frowsy appearance of hair, face and dress he suggested a tramp.

Nat stepped from the shelter behind the office, and walked straight up to the stranger. Nat was positive that the man saw him coming, yet the latter gave no evidence that this was a fact. The man was muttering to himself as he thrust the rod into the ground. Then he would thump it down and move the bar in the tube, as if probing around with it. He drew out the apparatus and waved it wildly like a magician's wand.

"Presto—alchemi!" he mumbled.

Nat stood right in front of him now, with the challenge:

"What are you doing, friend?"

The man looked up from under his long, gray, bushy eyebrows. His eyes shifted as he met Nat's penetrating glance.

"Divining rod," he said, touching the article in his hand.

"Oh, is that so?" asked Nat.

"Oh, the man's a crank!" whispered Jack in Nat's ear.

"What are you divining?" questioned Nat.

"Quicksilver. Presto—alchemi—huh!"

As if dismissing his visitors summarily, the man resumed his occupation of poking the rod into the ground.

"Humbug!" observed Nat bluntly. "You can't make us believe that you expect to find any quicksilver around here, or within a thousand miles of this spot."

"Avaunt!" solemnly pronounced the man, waving the rod at Nat in a circle. "Hist! you break the charm. Avaunt!"

"All right," said Nat; "have your fun thinking you are doing something, if there is any fun in it. Remember one thing, though, my friend, this is private property, and I am in charge of it. Don't go to making a nuisance of yourself, or we shall have to banish you."

The man mumbled a lot of jargon, and went on with his inexplicable operations. Nat beckoned to Jack, and they returned to the office.

"Queer sort, eh?" insinuated Jack.

"Too queer to be genuine," returned Nat, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I say, Jack, I want you to keep an eye on that fellow."

"I'll do it."

"And follow him when he leaves here—see where he goes to."

"Yes," acceded Jack, and after looking over things generally Nat went home.

His conversation with Colonel Harrington and his lawyer was considerably on the mind of the young real estate agent. After supper Nat brought up again the subject of the pasture lot.

He made his mother go over all she remembered of the transaction where a mysteriously missing deed had robbed her of property, which Nat knew would soon come into the market as a very valuable piece of real estate.

The results of the interview were not immediately encouraging. Nat realized that if he ever expected to solve the mystery involved, he must block out an intelligent investigation. This would take skill, patience and time.

"I wouldn't bother my mind about it, Nat, if I were you," advised his mother.

"I may not now," replied Nat, "while I am so busy with Mr. Chase's business; but as soon as I have a little leisure I am going to probe this matter to the bottom."

Jack did not greet Nat when the latter reached the subdivision the next morning. This was unusual. Jack was ordinarily up with the lark, and sprightly and ready for a day's brisk work.

"Hello! fast asleep," said Nat, as he pushed open the office door.

His arrival immediately aroused the sleeper. Jack sprang to his feet, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Caught me that time, didn't you?" he laughed. "Well, there's a reason."

"Is there?"

"A good one," retorted Jack; "following orders. You told me to keep track of that man with the divining rod, you remember?"

"Yes, Jack."

"Well, I did just that. It kept me up nearly all night."

"Tell me about it, Jack."

"Well, I kept out of sight in the office here after you left. The man with the divining rod stayed right here, poking away at the ground till long after dark. Finally he gave up his operations, and strolled off in the direction of the town."

"Did you run him down to the place where he lives?" inquired Nat.

"Not in Pleasantville. He went down along Railroad Street and into one or two places there. I hung around outside. It must have been eleven o'clock before he got through loafing about. In

the meantime he had made quite a number of purchases."

"Such as?" suggested Nat.

"Well, two big bottles. Then some herrings and crackers, at a grocery store. Finally he started away from the town. It was after midnight when he passed the subdivision."

"You following him, of course?"

"Yes, the chase was easy, and he was unsuspicious and off his guard, having been drinking pretty freely."

"Where did you land up with him?"

"You know where the old tannery was burned down?" asked Jack.

"About a mile up the river?"

"Same place. That is where the tramp ended. There's one or two sheds that escaped the fire. Well, this fellow went into one of them. He seemed to have fixed it up some to make it fairly habitable. It had a padlock on the door, and after he got inside he barred the door safe and sound. I began a patient watch."

"Go ahead, Jack."

"There is a little window at one end of the shed, and I posted myself there as soon as the fellow lit a candle. He placed his purchases on a table he had got somewhere. He had set up

a little stove, and in this he now started a fire. All of the time he kept drinking from one of the bottles. I could see that he was gradually beginning to feel pretty gay. He danced around, sung a little, and began to get unsteady on his pins. It must have taken him an hour to broil his herrings and get ready to eat his meal. It made me hungry to smell the cooking and watch him eat."

"You didn't think of joining him as his guest?" insinuated Nat with a smile.

"Hardly. The man had built a roaring hot fire in his little stove. By the time he had gotten one-half through his meal, he had emptied one of the bottles. He started to uncork the other, and it slipped from his hand and smashed on the floor of the shed. He groped around in a silly, helpless sort of a way, got up, pulled off his face——"

"How's that?" challenged Nat.

"False whiskers."

"Oh, that frowsy beard was false, eh?"

"Sure thing. He pulled it off, as I say, and landed like a lump on a mattress on the floor. That seemed the end of the programme for the night, and I was about to start back here when I thought I would wait a bit. You see, the little

stove was roaring red hot by this time. His face wasn't two feet from the stove, and I was actually afraid that the mattress would catch fire and burn up the man. By and by, though, the stove cooled down. I came away, but a funny thing happened before I did."

"What was that?" inquired Nat.

"Well, as the heat began to blister the man's face, there began to form on the cheek most exposed to the heat a great red outline. It grew redder and redder. Nat, it was a strange thing—an old scar, a birthmark. It came out like a perfect picture developed from a photographic plate. For all the world it resembled——"

"A lobster," said Nat quietly.

"Eh, what? Say!" cried the astonished Jack, with a vivid start, "how did you know?"

"I guessed it," replied Nat. "Am I right?"

"Yes, sir; you are!" assented Jack, staring wonderingly.

"I am guessing something else," continued Nat, half to himself. "The man is Perry, the fellow who was on the track of Hastings."

With the words Nat went out of the office. He proceeded straight over to where the stranger had placed the two pieces of brick and had made the holes on a straight line with his divining rod.

For the first time Nat paced off a certain distance to the north edge of the subdivision. Its line was marked by the stumps of fence posts that had been cut down to make way for a road.

Starting south from the old fence line, Nat put one foot before the other and paused as he reached the row of little round holes.

"As I thought," he said to himself, "the man with the divining rod is here for a purpose. His being here is a part of the secret of Hastings, for those holes are exactly—twenty feet from the fence!"

CHAPTER XX

A RIVAL SUBDIVISION

NAT BORDEN did not have to guess long to solve the enigma before him. Of course, he decided that the man with the divining rod was a fraud. He was play-acting so far as his eccentricities were concerned. He was here at the subdivision for a definite purpose. His queer actions had been assumed to throw others off the track of his real designs.

"He is the same man, Perry, who inquired at the hospital for Hastings, the night of the big storm," said Nat to himself. "The keynote of his interview with the flashy man was the burden of the poor tramp's dying anxiety—twenty feet from the fence. It certainly looks as though both the tramp and this man Perry came to Pleasantville to get on the track of something. There is a reward mixed up with it. Is it something hidden—buried? It must be, and everything fits to the theory that this is the right spot to find it. Those holes are exactly twenty feet from the old

fence they removed when we started plotting the subdivision. What has this man, Perry, been expecting to strike with his 'divining rod'? The lid of some metal box containing treasure, maybe. This affair may be important. I know what I am going to do about it. I'll have an interview with Perry the next time I run across him. In the meantime I will direct Jack to watch out for him closely, so if he does turn anything up he won't get away with it until we know who it belongs to."

In his mind right then Nat planned to make a visit that day to the shed up the river where Jack had told him Perry lived. That day, however, was like all days of late—full of bustle and business. Jack had followed out two suggestions made by Nat, and was working on them all the rest of the week.

Right at the center of the subdivision, where Magnolia Avenue, the designed principal thoroughfare, joined the Pleasantville Turnpike, there was a graceful rounding sweep. This formation of the road left a triangular spot of some size. Nat had ordered this graded up.

"We will decorate that when we get to it," he told Jack; "just like we will the square we have set apart for a little pleasure park."

It was pretty early in the spring to think of flowers, but Jack had surprised Nat a few mornings previous by showing a great lot of bushes lying ready to plant.

"Why, where did you get all those?" Nat had asked in some surprise.

"Oh, I've made great friends with Farmer Williams," explained Jack with a ready smile.

"And how did you get them here?"

"The farmer's boys helped me. You see, they are going to plough up some old garden space they had—getting it ready for carnations. They were going to throw the old stuff away. I grabbed it quick. You'll see what I'll do with it."

Jack was doing something decidedly neat and effective with the shrubs. There were several varieties of hardy early budding plants. Even now some of these were nearly in blossom. All of them were green and thrifty looking, and so far as he had proceeded, the ornamentation of the triangular plat was a pleasing, artistic welcome to visitors.

"There's the signs, too," remarked Jack the next day. "That's a great idea, Nat. Darry Haven has given us some big sheets of thick cardboard, that the rain can't soak nor the wind

blow to pieces very easily. I'm working nights on them, in the little back room of the office."

"You are working most of the time, Jack, it seems to me," said Nat, with a smile of approbation.

"Say, I'm just dead in love with this business, Nat!" declared Jack enthusiastically. "When I think of a few weeks ago, and now, why—— I believe there is something in life worth trying for. Two fellows, who work in the freight house, have agreed to take lots. They say they will be here on our opening day, with the cash for the first payment."

"Famous!" voted Nat.

"Then, there's Mr. Evans, the clothier. He has nearly eight hundred dollars to invest. He's coming out, too, and if things show up as I tell him, he will buy an acre tract."

"The more the merrier," commented Nat, "and when you get your two and one-half per cent. commission it will make your eyes glad."

"About the signs," resumed Jack, "I'm painting the cardboard black and the lettering yellow."

"Yes, that is a good combination," nodded Nat.

"You see, with the Havens, and Frank Newson, and the hardware man you've got on the string, we can truthfully set up the sign: 'This

plat is the prospective building site of so-and-so,' can't we, Nat?"

"I think that will be all right, Jack."

"Then, I'm making some small signs to indicate prices, especially the two blocks you want to sell off first. I've marked the corner lots as you told me, one hundred and fifty dollars, the next to the corner, one hundred and twenty-five dollars, and the inside lots one hundred dollars each."

"Quite right."

"I'll stick the signs on the appropriate lots, and I think, with the bushes and this decoration, the subdivision will be pretty gay Saturday."

"I have a few surprises for our visitors myself," said Nat mysteriously.

Jack made fine work of the signs. He had quite an artistic frame of mind. The little while he was working at the Franklin department store he did all the card writing for that establishment, and he was quite in his natural element now.

Tuesday morning, as Nat started from home for the subdivision, he ran against Stet, making a quick trip to the post office.

"Hi, I say, stop!" ordered the turbulent young newspaper man. "I've got something that will interest you."

"That so?" smiled Nat.

"Wait and see," and Stet set his armful of exchanges on a doorstep and began poking them over. "Here it is," he said at last. "It's the *Bugle,* Colonel Harrington's newspaper. I saw a copy just off the press last night. First page—look, and read, and tremble; ha! Your advertising is a mere pinhead speck to that of the newest subdivision—Harringtonville."

"Stet!" exclaimed Nat, opening the sheet offered him, "you don't mean to say he has dubbed his subdivision that?"

"See for yourself," retorted Stet. "Think of living in a town with a name of fifteen letters."

"Goodness!" simply commented Nat, as he fixed his eyes on the first page of the paper.

Its entire space had been given up to a boom advertisement of the rival land company—the Harrington Realty Co., sole owners and promoters of the new city, Harringtonville. It was one dead glaring front of black type, exclamation points, broad italics and a picture.

The advertisement announced that the nucleus of a great new city would be offered to the public Friday. Everybody, and everybody's neighbor, were invited to a grand outpouring, "to inspect and invest in the magnificent lots for sale."

As has been said, Colonel Harrington was a born imitator. He had stolen Nat's ideas wholesale. Even some of the clever catch lines in the North Pleasantville advertisements had been stolen bodily. That far the colonel had proceeded all right. When he came to describe the attractions of his opening day, however, his procedure was characteristic of the man.

The picture showed two pugilists in fighting costume. "At a large expense," the advertisement stated, "our generous-souled fellow townsman, Colonel Harrington," had secured the services of Jim Dacey and Tom Lester, "to engage in a rattling wrestling bout. Free admission to all—free cigars and free water, with something better free."

"Why!" ejaculated Nat, "the colonel is going to hold a revel!"

"A revel? An orgy!" cried Stet. "Can't you see what the conceited old blunderhead is taking on his hands—a regular jambouree! He's bidding for the tough crowd up around the mills just north of his land. Mighty few respectable Pleasantville people will catch at that bait, I can tell you, Nat Borden."

"Yes," said Nat, slowly and thoughtfully, "I can see you are quite right, Stet."

He felt serious, and not at all exultant over the big mistake Colonel Harrington was making. The settlement up at the mills, called Bristol, was just over the township line, and had a regular nest of wretched drinking places. Nat had no doubt that the free and easy distribution of drinks hinted at in the advertisement, would lead to some pretty lively times on the opening day of Harringtonville.

Nat told Jack about the incident when he reached the subdivision.

"I'm glad of it!" declared Jack. "Why shouldn't I be? Harrington has done all he could to break us up, and he doesn't deserve to succeed in anything."

About an hour later Nat went up the north road to take a look over the colonel's land. Some workmen were putting up a structure that looked like a dancing pavilion. Some light-framed booths had been already built.

"I am so near to the shed up at the old burned tannery, where Jack says that man Perry lives," ruminated Nat, "that I guess I'll give him a call. I've had it in mind for some days, but was too busy to get at it. Jack says he was on the subdivision again with his divining rod last night. I'm going to find out what the fellow is up to."

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE COMPACT

NAT soon reached the vicinity of the old burned-down tannery. He advanced towards the shed Jack had described. Its front door was open. Nat knocked at it.

Immediately a man, the man he was after, seated on a bench mending some garment, gave a prodigious start. Then he hurriedly put on some of his usually affected garb. He began to mutter to himself and act queer.

"Who calls?" he uttered in a coarse, guttural tone of voice, meant to be impressive.

"Do you know me, mister?" asked Nat.

The man nodded his head dissentingly, and went through various motions to indicate deep mental distraction. This was purely nonsensical to Nat, who was sure the man was playing a part.

"I am in charge of the subdivision where I caught you digging holes the other day," advised the young real estate agent.

"Um! divining rod—quicksilver," grunted the man.

"We are going to have a good many people on our land the next few days," proceeded Nat, "so I thought I would come and tell you that you will have to quit this tomfoolery of yours."

The man gave a great start. He quite lost his affected majestic and mystical pose, as he almost crouched back, glaring at Nat. He hissed something under his breath, the purport of which Nat did not catch. However, he felt certain that the man was beginning to realize that his affected rôle would be of no further use to him.

"We may as well understand one another, Mr. Perry," said Nat.

"What! who!——" the man shot out two disjointed words, and then sort of shriveled up in the steady gaze and unwavering front Nat maintained.

"Yes, I know who you are," proceeded Nat. "I know all about your following poor Hastings here. You were at the hospital that stormy night he died, weren't you?"

The man Nat knew to be Perry did not reply a word. He simply stood stock still and stared at Nat. His surprise was so great, that, resourceful man that he probably was, he was at a dead

loss now to meet this startling and unexpected confrontation.

"I know, too, about that friend of yours who is financing your visit here," continued Nat. "Knowing so much, it isn't likely that I am going to let you keep on probing around with that divining rod of yours—'twenty feet from the fence.' "

These words proved the climax to the situation. As Nat pronounced them, the man sank back on a bench, well-nigh collapsing. He looked at Nat and scowled. Nat looked back at him and smiled.

"I reckon I can stay around here as long as I want to," mumbled Perry, in an entirely new and natural tone of voice. "This is a free country."

"You can't stay on our subdivision, all the same," observed Nat definitely. "I shouldn't think, either, that you would care to stay anywhere around here."

"Why not?" glowered Perry.

"Because you might accidentally lose that false beard of yours, and get excited, or—well, overheated."

"Hey?"

"And then somebody, for instance a police offi-

cer, might recognize that lobster birthmark of yours on your right cheek."

Up to the cheek in question instantly went Perry's hand. He swallowed a great lump in his throat. He tried to study out some weakness in Nat's face, and failed. He squirmed, muttered, clenched his fists, unclenched them, and then made the remark, admiringly:

"All I've got to say is, that you are a mighty smart boy."

"Thank you," nodded Nat. "Now to business, eh?"

"What business?"

"About the Hastings secret."

Perry's eyes snapped as he seemed to be thinking deeply. At last he blurted out:

"How much do you know?"

"Guess," smiled Nat.

"You won't tell?"

"Never."

"And I've got to?"

"If you expect to come to any kind of an agreement."

"What do you mean by an agreement?"

"See here," said Nat, "I know all about you. There is something, I am free to confess, I don't know—about this 'twenty feet from the fence'

riddle. I do know enough, though, to keep your hands off until I find out. And any day a certain paper left by Hastings may come to light."

"You think I am looking for something 'twenty feet from the fence,' eh?" propounded Perry.

"I am sure of it," declared Nat.

"What, now?"

"Never mind quizzing me. Be sure of one thing, though—you'll never get at it while I run the subdivision, if I have to put a special guard on duty night and day. You make a clean breast of affairs. There's a reward involved, I understand."

"That's true."

"I'll agree to divide with you, provided everything is open and aboveboard."

"Say," said Perry, with an irresolute, but anxious sigh, "you've set me thinking. Who around here knows about this 'twenty feet from the fence' proposition besides you?"

"All of it? Not a soul in Pleasantville except myself."

"That's square?"

"Entirely so," pledged Nat.

"Will you continue to keep it to yourself for a few days longer?"

"If there is any object in doing so, yes."

"Look here," said Perry, "you may think there's a big bundle of plunder buried in that field. Maybe; maybe not, I'm not saying. Again, you may think it will be easy to find it. Mistake. Even I haven't got the clew."

"Has your partner?" demanded Nat bluntly. "Oh, you know—the flashily-dressed fellow who is backing you."

"I won't say," answered Perry. "I will say this, though, you agree to keep this business a secret between ourselves for three, four days—well, less than a week, till I can see my partner, as you call him."

"Well, what then?"

"I'll seek him out—it will take a little time—I'll put your proposition before him, and I believe he will be willing to work in cahoots with you."

"Good, it's a bargain," said Nat Borden.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FATE OF HARRINGTONVILLE

"THEY'RE keeping it up, Nat."

"And right lively, too."

"If it's on a par with the programme of this afternoon, Harrington is one of the lost cities."

"Yes," said Nat soberly, "I am afraid that the Harrington Realty Company is deader than a herring."

It was Friday evening, just at dusk, Nat and a companion sat in chairs tilted back against the front of the little office building. The companion was Ned Procter, an old friend, with whom Nat had been corresponding for two weeks or more.

Ned's father had been an old circus man. When he died, about all he left to Ned was a famous elephant known as Young Bolivar. When Nat was working for the Franklin Department store he had got acquainted with Ned. The latter had allowed Nat to use Bolivar in a

street parade advertising a great sale at the store. Ned had reached the subdivision from across country about three o'clock in the afternoon. Jack had gone up the river to witness the founding of Harringtonville. Nat and Ned had also spent an hour at that riotous demonstration. They were now discussing the same.

During the few preceding days, the news had been pretty generally circulated among the slums of Pleasantville and its environs, that a free and easy programme was on at the great land opening. That morning Nat had noticed that the majority of those coming from town on foot or in the colonel's hired busses, comprised recruits from professional loafers around town.

About noon the great realty magnate himself and his lawyer whizzed by on the turnpike in a new automobile, flashily trimmed up with flags and ribbons. They were followed by a second machine, in which the two advertised wrestlers, in ring attire, were seated with their manager.

Jack, who was on pins and needles of excitement and expectancy, almost neglected his own necessary work on the subdivision to keep track of the goings-on at Harringtonville. He flitted over to the enemy's territory times out of number during the day, to return with explosive sen-

sational reports of the carryings-on, as he termed it.

When Nat and Ned proceeded to the scene of the demonstration, they found the situation quite a little worse than Jack had reported. Just as they had anticipated, the free-for-all affair had attracted the roystering element up at the mills. The amateur wrestling match developed into a slugging affair, and brought together all the cheap sports of Bristol, and their friends from surrounding towns swelled the crowd.

The boys only looked into the refreshment tent. There was a great crowd here. A single glance satisfied Nat that the Harrington Realty Company was liberally redeeming its promise to supply visiting clients "with water, and better than water." Every man who entered came out puffing a cheap cigar, and with the smell of liquor on his breath.

It was almost grotesque—Nat termed it pitiful—to watch the progenitor of all this magnificence. Colonel Harrington wore his glossiest silk hat, and strutted around, carrying a big gold-headed cane with the manner of some king. He and his "reception committee" wore rosettes on their coats as a distinguishing mark.

Things were beginning to get fairly uproarious

by the time Nat thought it best to return to the subdivision. The boys had already witnessed one or two fist fights. A rowdy group from the mills had smashed the stand of a peanut vender and appropriated his wares. Ned predicted that when the gasoline lamps were lit for the evening dancing programme, there would be some wild and riotous scenes.

"You think there will be no disappointment about your share in the programme, Ned?" asked Nat, resuming their conversation at the home subdivision.

"Not a bit of it," confidently responded the sprightly circus lad. "One of the wagons will be here before midnight, and the other the first thing in the morning."

"Hello—there's a ruction!" yelled Ned, springing to his feet suddenly.

From the direction of Harringtonville a great clamor had suddenly echoed out. It was a mixture of shouts and screams. Then there was a crash, and then in quick succession several pistol shots.

"And, look—what's that glare?" joined in Nat.

A growing haze now marked some unusual illumination in the direction of Harringtonville.

An indescribable hubbub accompanied this new manifestation.

A ladder lay alongside the office building. Nat raised it quickly. He ran up its rounds.

"Fire!" he announced, and then he called down to his comrade: "Come up here, quick, Ned."

The friends, astride the roof, occupied an elevation sufficient to afford them a pretty fair view of the tract of land up the river.

"It's the dancing pavilion," commented Ned. "There isn't much to burn, but, judging from the way people are rushing about there's considerable excitement afloat."

"I wonder how it happened?"

The question was soon answered. A few minutes later, after the glare had somewhat subsided, Nat and Ned descended to the ground. Almost immediately Jack Harwell put in an appearance, on a brisk run.

"Well, fellows, they've done it!" he panted, sinking into one of the chairs.

"What's happened, Jack?" inquired Nat.

"Fire, riot, pandemonium let loose! Things have been getting up to the boiling point for the last half hour."

"We judged that from the uproar," observed Ned.

"The programme has been hot, hotter, hottest. Those two plug-uglies they had battering one another in what they called a wrestling match, made a dismal failure of their slugging, and were hooted off the place. Then a lot of private fist fights followed. The worst of it was when a young farmer and his crowd started out to get the scalp of Colonel Harrington."

"Why, what for?" asked Nat.

"It seems that some of those gamblers induced the fellow to buy a house and lot a mile away from the colonel's ground for one hundred dollars. They hocus-pocused him with a bit of writing they called a deed. Then they made themselves scarce with the money. Some of the friends of the farmer discovered the cheat, and they banded together and made a rush for Colonel Harrington. He laughed in their faces, bluntly told the farmer he had been tricked, and strutted around in such an indifferent way that some one smashed his fine silk hat. The whole crowd then made a rush for him, and rolled him in a mud puddle."

"Did the man get any satisfaction for his hundred dollars?" inquired Ned.

"No, and he left for town, vowing he would get out a warrant for the colonel."

"What about the fire, Jack?" inquired Nat.

"That was when the reception committee tried to reason with the crowd. I tell you, there was a furious battle for a few minutes. Some one tore down an awning and a gasoline lamp with it. The whole flimsy business went up in smoke inside of five minutes. I say, Nat, that settles Harringtonville. I fancy the colonel will be quite humble and subdued for some time to come."

"You mistake the man, Jack."

"What! when he sees or hears of our orderly, decent, businesslike proposition?"

"It will make him only the madder and meaner," declared Nat. "He is a resentful, dangerous person where he sees anybody else succeeding where he failed."

"Huh!" commented the optimistic Jack. "Let him be a grouch all he wants to. After all our careful arrangements, he can't prevent the opening day of North Pleasantville from being a grand success."

"I don't think he can or will, Jack," said Nat; "but, all the same, we will look out for his treacherous tricks farther along the line."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GREAT DAY

THE next morning ushered in the most important day of the young land agent's life. A fairer morning never dawned in the estimation of Nat Borden. He was out of bed, had dispatched breakfast, and was on his way to the subdivision by six o'clock.

Nat trod on air. All of his arrangements so far had gone on smoothly. During the past week he and his mother had devoted the evenings to sending out an enormous amount of circulars to addresses all around the county. The *Herald* had gotten out an extra sheet describing the subdivision, which had been circulated broadcast. Posters were up at every street corner in Pleasantville, at every crossroads through the county.

Toot—toot!

Boom!

Nat almost danced. As it was, a prodigious smile lit up his face, and he let out a yell:

"Hurrah—they've arrived, just as Ned said they would!"

It was enough to inspire any live, up-to-date boy, the environment of the young land agent at just that moment. Nat was rounding a grove of maples, and the subdivision came into view as the sounds indicated echoed out upon the clear morning air.

What had arrived, in fact, was a band of music —further, a mysterious canvas-covered wagon, all closed up and standing somewhat out of the range of the main street of the subdivision. Both wagons were the result of Nat's two weeks' correspondence with Ned Procter.

As Nat neared North Pleasantville, he could make out his faithful assistant, Jack Harwell, raising a new silk flag on the pole set up on the little office building. Ned was hustling about a gilded band wagon, seated in which, or hovering about its vicinity, were nearly a dozen musicians in uniforms, brushing up their clothes or trying their instruments.

Nat's arrival was the signal for a general rush on the part of the band. This was the same musical combination that Nat had found nearly six months back with Ned Proctor and his baby elephant, Young Bolivar, stranded in a little coun-

try town. A bright idea came to Nat. It was the nucleus of his great bargain sale at the Franklin Department store which had brought him such favor with his employers.

"Got here after midnight, Nat," reported Ned Procter, "and they've been howling for something to eat since three o'clock. Jack had to hitch up and almost burglarize the town bakery to get food here in time to save them from starving."

"Und dot putcher, likeweiser," announced the trombone man, waving half a sausage with an unctious smack of the lips.

"Nat, here comes Mr. Chase," suddenly announced Jack, and he and his companions started towards the turnpike, where their employer had just halted in an automobile.

Mr. Chase alighted and dismissed the chauffeur, and stood staring over the scene before him, wearing a most animated expression on his face. He had been so busy at the town office that he had not been down to the subdivision for two days.

"I declare!" he observed, and stood staring about him, lost in surprise and admiration.

There was plenty to see to evoke in him the greatest pleasure and satisfaction. Everything was in applie-pie order on the subdivision. Jack

had most artistically arranged the plants at the parklike entrance. The signs indicating future factory sites, all trim and neat, were in place. The big tent, with its front flap neatly held up by an American flag, showed a most inviting interior.

The band wagon stood near a small platform just outside the tent, beside which were rows and rows of benches. The big sign fronting the road, with its new shining advertisement of North Pleasantville, could be seen half a mile away.

"Borden," said Mr. Chase, with a beaming face, "I cannot express my pleasure at the way you have arranged things here. This little garden plat is simply fine."

"Jack," reported Nat, with a laudatory wave of his hand at his companion.

"Good. Those signs are attractive, and a big idea."

"Jack again," insisted Nat, bound to award his faithful assistant his full share of praise.

"Now, see here, Nat Borden," expostulated Jack modestly.

"No, look here, Jack Harwell," interrupted Nat, pointing to the little office building trimmed up with gay bunting and sprigs of evergreen, with

the stars and stripes waving grandly in the breeze overhead, "I tell you, Mr. Chase, Jack has worked like a Trojan."

"I can see that," said Mr. Chase in a pleased, proud way. "Whatever success attends to-day's experiment, lads, you both will have had a wonderful part in it. I am expecting a good many friends and a good many sales. It looks as though everything was going through without a hitch, and grandly encouraging results at the end of it."

Mr. Chase went to the office. Nat and Jack held a brief business conversation.

"The livery company has contracted to make it easy and comfortable for anybody wishing a ride to the subdivision and back to town again," said Nat. "The refreshments will be here with a force to serve about noon. You had better keep a supervision over that department, Jack."

"All right, Nat."

"I shall have to look after things on the grounds generally," continued Nat. "After the crowds are fed up you find me out, and we'll devote the rest of the time to working up sales."

"I suppose Ned will be busy directing the musical programme?" observed Jack.

"No, he's arranged for all that. Ned's par-

ticular stunt, as he calls it, will be sending up balloons."

"Sending up balloons?" repeated Jack in a mystified way.

"Yes," replied Nat, pointing to the closely covered wagon that had arrived with the circus contingent.

"I don't understand," stammered Jack.

"Well, that's the surprise I hinted to you about," advised the young real estate agent. "There's five hundred balloons in that wagon."

"What?" almost shouted Jack.

"That's right."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Send them afloat this afternoon."

"Oh, you mean toy balloons?"

"Exactly," responded Nat. "One of them will have attached a free and clear deed to a lot. every twentieth balloon will have a receipt good for a first ten-dollar payment on a lot in North Pleasantville."

"Say!" aspirated Jack in breathless admiration—"it's a great scheme, and it will be a winner."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ADVERTISING BALLOONS

By NINE o'clock the busses began to run, and within an hour fully two hundred persons were on the grounds. At exactly eleven Nat Borden mounted the little platform near the big tent, a megaphone in his hands.

"Attention, all!" he flared forth, according to instructions and arrangements.

"This way, ladies and gentlemen!" invited Jack, circulating among the now odd five hundred people sauntering about the subdivision.

At the same moment the band in the circus wagon struck up a lively tune. The center of attraction was thus established. People came flocking from all directions, guessing that some important feature of the programme was about to be exploited.

The side canvasses of the big tent were now lifted up, disclosing a convenient and comfortable auditorium well supplied with benches. In a

short time the crowd had settled themselves and quieted down, and Mr. Chase mounted the platform.

In a few well-chosen words he outlined the object of the present occasion. Then he introduced Mr. Harold Frisbie, who he said would give a brief talk on the merits and prospects of the subdivision enterprise.

There was a cheer for the new speaker, just as Nat had anticipated, for young Frisbie was popular all over the county. Nat had done a wise thing in selecting him. Frisbie was a lawyer who was poor but ambitious. He was a natural orator, eloquent, interesting and very humorous. He soon had the crowd laughing in rare good humor over some of his local witticisms. Then he had them seriously interested in his prophecy of the vast benefit North Pleasantville would prove for the community at large.

"And, ladies and gentlemen," observed the speaker in conclusion, "I wish to read you a little programme. From twelve to two free refreshments for everybody, and all you want of them, in the big tent.

"At one o'clock sharp five hundred balloon ascensions. Yes, my friends, five hundred. Keep your eye on the covered wagon over yonder,

and you will see that number of these interesting little messengers of the air soar grandly through the empyrean——"

"Aw! gimme one, mister, won't you?" sang out a juvenile voice wistfully.

A roar of laughter arose at this ludicrous interruption to the oratorical flight of the speaker of the day, in which Mr. Frisbie himself joined heartily.

"You shall have a dozen, if you can catch them," replied Mr. Frisbie. "That is what they are here for—to catch. To the string attached to twenty-five of these balloons a folded paper has been tied. One of these documents is a free and clear deed to a finely-located lot in the subdivision."

There was a rustle and murmer of new interest and excitement at this attractive announcement.

"Twenty-four other balloons," continued the speaker, "will have attached a receipt good for a ten-dollar payment on a lot. The lucky finders or catchers of these balloons are requested to report at the office of the Riverview Land Company before the day is over."

"Hurrah!" yelled several excitable youngsters.

Mr. Chase had carrried out an important suggestion made by Nat. This was for the provi-

sion for the presence of half a dozen policemen. They had been regularly sworn in for special duty. Just before he went to his apportioned tasks at the refreshment tent, Jack found an opportunity to pass a few words with Nat.

"I say," he observed, chuckling, "those policemen of yours know their business."

"Do they, Jack?" asked Nat.

"Scrumptiously. A mob of young fellows led by Jack Ducro broke into the subdivision a little while ago. I don't know that Colonel Harrington hired them to raise a disturbance, but they started in on that line all right. Ducro got up a rock-firing party, with one of my special signs as a target. They split it to pieces, and ran when one of the specials put in an appearance. All of them got away except Ducro. Say, Nat, that big officer just doubled the young rowdy over his knee. Then he reached for a good thick piece of splintered sign."

"And then, Jack?"

"Whack! whack! whack! such a spanking! Ducro limped off towards Bristol walking bow-legged and whimpering like a baby."

The midday lunch was a grand success. The improvised tables in the tent accommodated over one hundred persons. There was plenty of room,

and everybody was made comfortable. The great crowd was fed in four detachments, and Ned Procter and his musicians helped Jack dish up the ice cream, ladle out the lemonade and hand out the sandwiches.

Mrs. Borden and three neighbor ladies superintended the distribution of the food from the big hampers, and the vast merit of the refection in popular estimation was that application for two helpings, or even three, were met with accommodating smiles and ready service.

Nat managed to get away from the office at one o'clock sharp, and the megaphone was again brought into service at the grand stand. He repeated the announcement already made by Mr. Frisbie, and expectant eyes were turned upon the covered wagon.

Its roof folded out in two sections. Ned and Jack were inside. The little red rubber balloons had been brought from the circus ground. They had been especially made for the occasion by a man who followed the manufacture as an industry and supplied them regularly to the circus "butchers."

The little air sailers had been filled scientifically for the occasion. As they began to pour out of the top of the wagon, the juvenile portion of the

outside waiting crowd grew fairly frantic with excitement.

The balloons did not bound up into the air and sail to any great height. They lazily ascended, so tantalizingly slow that some tried to reach them with umbrellas and by climbing the tent poles. One after another there was a continuous string of them. Whenever a balloon appeared with a slip of paper tied to its dangling string, a series of yells would ring out, while crowding, jostling, cheering contestants would rush in the direction taken by the little red globes of rubber.

A good many went up about one hundred feet, took a slanting run and dropped to the ground. Then there would ensue a regular football scrimmage, and two or more triumphant lucky ones would emerge from the heap of struggling humanity with torn clothing and bruised faces, bearing aloft a mere torn fragment of the exploded sphere.

CHAPTER XXV

FOUL PLAY

THERE were races of over a mile after some of the balloons. There were tumbles and squabbles innumerable over the possession of the coveted spheres. Nat did not have much of an opportunity to witness all this fun, for about two o'clock the real business of the day began.

Nat was both surprised and delighted as the hours went by. Before three o'clock over fifteen persons had appeared and had paid ten dollars down on their lot purchases. A little later five of the fortunate possessors of the balloon slips came in to register their names.

Two gentlemen appeared, strangers to Nat, stating they were residents of Springfield and friends of Mr. Chase. One selected a whole block frontage comprising ten lots, and gave a check for one hundred dollars. The other selected a two-acre lot, and paid in fifty dollars forfeit money in cash. Nat did everything system-

atically and in a business way. The selections and payments were duly registered by the stenographer and receipts issued.

About four o'clock Mr. Chase himself appeared, and rather hurriedly beckoned Nat into the little room behind the office.

"How are things going, Borden?" he inquired, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief, as if he himself had not been idle.

"Splendidly, Mr. Chase," reported Nat. "There has been no haggling or difficulty whatever in interesting those who came really to invest if things were as advertised."

"I am more than pleased and encouraged, Borden," said his employer. "I dropped in to tell you that I have got to get back to the office at the hotel. Some gentlemen from Dover will arrive on the five o'clock train. They are talking of quite a big deal, know all about the land here, and may not come down to the subdivision. I shall probably be busy with them for several hours. Do you think you can run things here all right?"

"With the aid of my trusty friends, I am sure of it," replied Nat, with a bright smile.

"Very well. Just bundle up your papers and the cash when the sale is over," directed Mr.

Chase, with a glance at an envelope box beside the desk, where Nat had temporarily deposited checks and money received. "We'll put in a small safe here next week."

"Yes, sir," said Nat.

"Report to me at the hotel when you come into town. We must have a little confab over affairs this evening."

Mr. Chase departed, looking and feeling like a highly-satisfied person. A group of men and women representing four families took up Nat's time for nearly an hour. They were friendly neighbors in the town, and related by marriage. Two of them owned Pleasantville property they intended to sell. Two of the others had quite cozy sums in the savings banks.

"We want to get the children out among grass and flowers and fresh air," proclaimed the spokesman of the party.

"This is certainly the ideal spot for all that," declared Nat.

"Can you fix us out with four fifty-foot lots in a group?" inquired one of the men.

Nat said that he could, and they consulted the big plat on the office wall. Certain lots were located. Two of the men went away to inspect

them, returned, and the result was the payment of a hundred dollars cash on the property.

"Here you are, gentlemen!" rang out in Jack Harwell's voice, just after the family group had departed, and Nat had two new clients on hand. They were the freight house men whom Nat had been canvassing as prospective buyers for over two weeks.

Jack, with shining eyes, lifted up all the fingers on one hand outspread, as he accompanied his customers from the office.

"Good for you!" nodded Nat, understanding that his industrious assistant had sold five lots in all.

There was a lull in business after that. Nat dismissed the stenographer at six o'clock. Ned Procter strolled into the office shortly afterwards. They were discussing the events of the day with animation and interest, when one of the special policemen reported, with a grinning face:

"Beat that pesky Jack Ducro," he chuckled, "and he's a good one."

Just then a series of shouts drew all hands out of the office. A yelling, scampering procession was rushing forward, headed for the office. It was made up mostly of boys. They were bearing

along a plank scraper square, seated upon which was a hatless, white-faced lad.

"Why, it's Tim, the crippled newsboy!" exclaimed Nat.

"That's just who it is!" shouted out Stet, who led the procession, "only he's Tim, the landowner, this time."

Nat's face grew into a glad smile.

"You mean——" he began.

"Tim has drawn the prize—yes, sir, and he deserves it, and everybody is glad he got it. Hip! hip! hurrah!" and the excited mob joined in the cheering.

Tim got off the platform with his crutch under his arm. He had lost his hat, his clothing was covered with burrs, and he was wet to the knees.

"Is it all right, Nat?" he faltered in a tone tremulous with anxiety, extending a soaked, torn scrap of paper.

"Yes," answered Nat, with a glance at the battered document. "This entitles you to the prize of the day, a clear lot in the choicest part of the subdivision."

Tim departed, bubbling over with happiness, after he had narrated a thrilling story of his wild chase and final capture of the prize balloon.

"Say," remarked Stet, "I'd rather see that poor,

honest fellow get the free lot than anybody I know of."

They all laughed over Stet's enthusiasm. Ned rescued some ice cream and cake from the remnants of the feast at the tent. They formed a jolly little party of friends, and then, as dusk came on, various members of the group drifted away townwards.

Nat had put the office to rights. He had made a compact package of the checks and cash taken in, and stowed it carefully in an inside pocket. By seven o'clock the subdivision was practically deserted. He, Jack Harwell and Ned Procter occupied the little office.

"You say you are going to stay here until to-morrow, Ned?" inquired Nat.

"I think I'd better, Nat."

"Then come home with me."

"Much obliged, but I believe I will bunk in with Jack here. He's invited me, and I'll enjoy the novelty of that patent office bed of his. Besides, I want to keep an eye on the band boys."

"They will stay all night, too?" inquired Nat.

"Why, yes; didn't I tell you?—another engagement."

"Where?"

"Know where Gresham is?"

"Yes; twenty miles down the line from Pleasantville."

"Exactly. Well, it seems the mayor of that town attended our opening here. He got talking to me, and asked me about the band. I told him we were hunting for odd jobs until the circus started up again. It appears there is to be a semi-centennial celebration at Gresham day after to-morrow."

"I understand," nodded Nat; "and they want you people to furnish the music for the occasion."

"That's it," assented Ned; "you see, one good job brings another."

"You did finely," commented Nat, "and Mr. Chase will give me the money for your bill when I see him this evening."

"The man from Gresham will consult with his festival committee first thing in the morning, and telegraph me here before noon if my terms are accepted," explained Ned. "He says they will be, but he wants to go through the usual form of making it official. I thought we might as well stay here until we hear from him. The band is used to sleeping in the wagon."

Nat decided to drive to town in the carryall. The subdivision horse needed shoeing, and Nat

felt that he had earned an hour's extra rest in the morning.

"I will leave the rig at the livery stable," explained Nat, "and order him shod. Then I will drive around by the depot in the morning for any stray visitors, and get here about eight o'clock."

"All right," said Jack, and in a few minutes he had the rig ready for Nat at the front of the subdivision office.

"Good night," cried Ned, waving his hand cheerily to Nat, as his friend took up the lines.

"Good night, Ned," replied Nat. "Jack, old fellow, don't stay awake counting over your opulent commissions."

"Hurrah for the greatest day of our lives!" retorted Jack exuberantly, and Nat drove away.

Jack and Ned sat in the office, resting after their arduous duties. They chatted, lunched and laughed gayly over the numerous amusing and entertaining events of the day.

Half an hour must have passed by when Ned suddenly started up with the sharp challenge:

"What was that?"

"It sounded like a horse's neigh," said Ned, and both rushed to the door.

"Why!" exclaimed Jack in consternation; "it's the carryall."

It was the carryall, but with no driver on the seat. The whip was missing, and the lines dragged under the feet of the horse. The animal had halted, but was reeking with perspiration and breathing hard, as if from a rapid run.

"Why, where's Nat?" cried Ned in a startled tone. "Is it a runaway?"

"Not with this horse," dissented Jack; "he's gentle as a lamb."

Jack had jumped into the wagon and was looking over the front seat sharply. He interrupted his friend with a violent aspiration.

"See!" he cried in a thrilling voice, his eyes dilating as he held up a cap trodden out of shape, and a collar and necktie badly crumpled and torn. "Ned, there's foul play here!"

The cap and the collar and the necktie both boys immediately identified as belonging to Nat Borden. Their eyes met in a mutual conviction that something was wrong—decidedly wrong!

CHAPTER XXVI

MISSING

JACK was seated in the anteroom of the town office of the Riverview Land Company. It was the second day after the opening of the subdivision. Mr. Chase was conversing with some one on business in the room beyond. Jack was waiting to see his employer.

Since the hour that the horse and carryall had returned driverless to the little office on the subdivision, gloom and anxiety had shadowed all the bright hopes and happiness and ambitions of the young assistant. Nat Borden had apparently slipped out of existence. The last seen of him by any one of Pleasantville, was when he waved his hand cheerily in adieu, as he started for town with the proceeds of the day's real estate sales.

Jack made a strong effort to control his emotions when Mr. Chase's visitor came out of the room. Jack entered in his turn, removed his hat, and revealed a white and worried face to the view of his employer.

"Have you any news?" inquired Mr. Chase.

"Not a word, sir—not a trace. Nat is gone. He's been kidnapped, maybe murdered. Oh, I know who did it! I know that this is some work of that scoundrel, Colonel Harrington!"

"Easy, Jack," remonstrated Mr. Chase soothingly. "You don't feel any worse than I do over Borden's disappearance, but we mustn't let our nerves go to pieces. On the contrary, now is the critical time when we need to put on the safety brake."

"I can't help it!" cried Jack, with a rush of tears, rising to his feet and pacing the floor distractedly. "Mr. Chase, I'd stick to my duty with you to the last ditch, appreciating all your great kindness to me, but I can't stand this strain any longer—I've got to resign."

"Resign, Jack?" repeated Mr. Chase.

"Yes, sir, I must. It just seems as if iron chains are pulling me from the subdivision every minute I remain at work there. It's Nat all the time, just as if he was calling to me. I've got to do something to find him, or I'll go wild."

"I don't see what you can do, Jack," said Mr. Chase, his tone a trifle husky, and a suspicion of moisture in his eyes. He was evidently touched at the deep loyalty and devotion of Jack to his

friend. "I have employed every auxiliary possible to trace down Borden. The police, a special detective, all the many friends of Borden are scouring the country in every direction for a trace of him."

"I can't help it," responded Jack. "I have my own ideas. Are they watching Harrington?"

"Why should they?" inquired Mr. Chase.

"Why should they?" almost shouted Jack. "Because he, of course, is the head and center of the plot to get rid of Nat Borden. Hasn't he persecuted him from the start? Doesn't he hate him? Harrington is at the bottom of this affair, and I know it."

"Jack, you are mistaken," said Mr. Chase.

"I can't be."

"But you are. I am going to tell you something very confidential. Harrington is a scoundrel, as you rightly term it, but he has had nothing to do with the disappearance of Borden."

"Are you sure of that, Mr. Chase?" inquired Jack earnestly.

"I am fairly positive of it, and I am going to tell you why, though I do not want you to repeat what I am going to say. Have you seen Jack Ducro about the town recently?"

"Nearly every day," replied Jack.

"Have you noticed the man who is a good deal in his company?"

"A stranger? Yes, sir. A new crony of his, I suppose."

"Seemingly so," replied Mr. Chase; "but in reality he is a detective."

"A detective!" repeated Jack with a gasp.

"Yes, in my employ."

"Why, Mr. Chase——"

"When Borden was accused of stealing the colonel's wallet," explained Mr. Chase, "I determined to run down the plot and motive of that mean undertaking. We all had our suspicions of Ducro. Those suspicions are now verified. The detective has deftly got himself into the confidence of Ducro. He has learned that it was Ducro who burned down our big sign up at the subdivision, for Ducro has inadvertently confessed it. He has, further, all the links in the chain revealing the plot surrounding that yellow wallet belonging to the colonel."

"I am glad to hear it," said Jack, "although no one for a moment ever doubted Nat's innocence. But what has all that to do with Nat's disappearance?"

"Just this," replied Mr. Chase; "the detective, unsuspected in his real purpose by either

Ducro or Colonel Harrington, has kept a close watch on both of them. He is absolutely certain that neither had any hand in the disappearance of Borden. His reports to me on their whereabouts the night Borden was found missing, and their actions since that event, prove conclusively to me that while they are glad of any misfortune that could happen to Borden or anybody else connected with the subdivision, they had no part in his robbery, kidnapping, or whatever the mystery surrounding our young friend may be."

Jack quieted down somewhat under the gentle direction and advice of his employer. He consented to resume his duties at the subdivision, but it was with a heavy heart.

He left Mr. Chase with lagging steps and a dispirited face. Not fifty yards progressed from the hotel, Jack came to a halt, confronted by Stet.

"Have you seen it?" he shouted at Jack.

"Seen what?"

"The *Bugle*—the 'Sewer' it ought to be called. Look there!"

In appalled stupefaction, Jack Harwell cast his eye over the first column of the *Bugle,* just fresh from the press.

In a double-leaded article headed: "A Young

Embezzler," the disappearance of Nat Borden was graphically described. The *Bugle* intimated that he had played his cards to make one grand swoop, and had defaulted and fled with the entire proceeds of the great land sale.

"Stet," quavered Jack, white to the lips with trembling emotion, "Mr. Chase must see this at once."

Stet accompanied Jack to the hotel. Jack handed the newspaper to Mr. Chase.

The capitalist read the article through from end to end. Indignation, amazement, and then a grim resolution played in turn across his face.

"Shameful!" said he finally, with an evident effort to control himself. Then, his lips firmly set, his eyes wearing an expression accusing and foreboding for the miscreant he had in mind, he added:

"Whether or not the owner of this wretched sheet had any hand in the disappearance of Nat, if anything serious has happened to my faithful employee, I will send Colonel Harrington to the penitentiary."

CHAPTER XXVII

NAT A PRISONER

When Nat left the subdivision office the evening of the great opening sale, his mind was so full of his enlivening experience of the day and the satisfactory results of the same, that he had no apprehension of trouble lying in wait for him down the dark road.

Suddenly, as he passed a grove of maples lining the road, which somewhat shadowed it, Nat made out a conveyance coming towards him. He strained his sight, and he discovered an automobile.

The machine had no lights, and this was strange, thought Nat, for the law was very strict in Pleasantville as to motor vehicles. Nat turned aside to give it room, when suddenly, with a deft turn, the driver of the machine swung it full length directly across the road.

"Whoa!" commanded Nat sharply, bringing the carryall to a sudden halt. "Hey there—in trouble?"

There was no response. Then behind him Nat heard a quick step, and the springs of the carryall bounced up and down, and he knew that some one had jumped into the vehicle from the rear.

So quickly that Nat could not dodge or jump from the high front seat of the carryall, Nat found his head enclosed clear to the shoulders in some kind of a thick, heavy bag. His cap was knocked off. He struggled and shouted out. His assailant muffled his cries by choking him.

Nat tried to rally, a swimming sensation dizzied his brain, and he relapsed into unconsciousness.

When Nat opened his eyes again, he found himself lying on an old-fashioned bed. It was night, but there was a light in the adjoining room, the door of which stood open. Nat tried to rise. Then, with a dismayed sensation, he fell back to a recumbent position. He found that a pair of light handcuffs, connected with a four-inch chain, encircled his wrists. Around his waist was a belt of linked wire, and from this ran still another chain, which was wound round and round a heavy post of the bed and was padlocked.

Nat became at once anxious for the safety of his money. Then his mind was relieved. As he

wriggled, he felt the pressure of the cash and checks he had stowed away.

At that moment two men came into the adjoining room, and in the light of a candle set on the table Nat readily recognized them.

Nat, with some surprise, and a good deal of enlightenment, observed the man Perry. His companion was the same man whom Nat had seen the night that the tramp, Hastings, died at the hospital. He was the flashily-dressed man who was the avowed financier of Perry's schemes.

"Well," observed Perry, "so far, so good. Now, then, what's the next move on the programme?"

"You are sure the boy will be safe here for the next day or two?"

"Do you know a more lonely or isolated spot?"

"That's so," responded the other. "We have got to get him into a safer, surer place, though. You see, it may take you a month to dig up that booty on the subdivision."

"Yes, and there's no chance while this keen-witted young fellow is hanging around. He's sharp as a razor and bright as a dollar."

"So it seems. He must be kept closely shut up till you find the stuff. Here's my plan: I have

a friend at a little town about one hundred miles from here. He runs a private hospital for queer patients. He was one of our crowd, but has become respectable and now poses as a specialist. So, you see, I hardly know his precise texture of mind at the present time."

"I see," nodded Perry.

The men soon afterwards left the room. Perry returned in about an hour. He carried a pitcher of water and some crackers and cheese. He laid these on a chair directly beside the bed, where Nat could reach them by squirming about a little. Then he closed the door between the two rooms and apparently went to sleep.

Nat now knew why he had been kidnapped. He lay awake for an hour, analyzing the situation. It was certainly not very pleasant or hopeful. He was in the power of determined, unscrupulous men. If their plans went through, he would lose weeks of time that could be devoted preciously to the land business. The conspirators might find their booty "twenty feet from the fence," would decamp with it, and he would never know the merits of the Hastings mystery.

He finally went to sleep, and when he awoke found fresh water and some cold meat and bread

at his bedside. He did not see Perry again till nightfall. Then the man came into the room, released the main chain securing Nat, and allowed him to exercise about the yard for an hour.

After providing Nat with his breakfast early the next morning, Perry left the house. Nat could trace his movements by the sound of his footsteps. He decided that his gaoler had gone to the nearest town, after more provisions or to communicate with his fellow schemer.

Nat now made renewed efforts to get free, at least more at ease. He managed to place his feet on the floor, and, by jerking hard, inch by inch moved the heavy bed towards the window. He tore down the paper shading it, pushed out a pane of glass with his elbow, and vaguely hoped some one might appear or pass to whom he might appeal for aid.

It must have been nine o'clock when Nat craned his neck eagerly. A man had appeared, coming from the direction of the road in front of the house.

The man stared up at the window, saw Nat, and was about to run.

"Don't go," called down Nat eagerly. "Come up here. I'm in trouble."

"Trouble?" repeated the man suspiciously.

"Yes, I am a prisoner, chained to a bed. If you will help me, I will make it worth your while."

"In money?"

"Yes."

"This isn't a trap?" demanded the man warily.

"No, I'm the one who is in a trap. Smash in the door! Come up here. Quick!"

"I don't have to smash in the door," proclaimed the stranger in what Nat considered was a rather boastful way.

Then Nat made up his mind that the fellow was a professional burglar. Into his pockets he groped again. The man drew out another inpliment, different from the first.

Deftly inserting it in the keyhole of the kitchen door that obstacle went flying open as if at the touch of a magic wand.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN ODD COMRADE

"Don't delay," urged Nat. "Can you help me any?"

"I should say I could," declared the man vauntingly, "only—how did you ever get into this fix?"

"I'll be in a worse one, if you don't rescue me at once."

"How is that?"

"The men who chained me up this way intend to put me in a still tighter place, if I am here when they come back."

"Which they won't," pronounced the stranger.

If Nat had been amazed at the celerity and skill with which the man had opened the window and door below, he was fairly astonished at his new activities. His rescuer once more reached within his coat. He produced a pair of exquisitely modeled nippers. These he applied to the ends of the various chains. He snipped them off as if they were mere threads.

They left the house at once. Nat took the lead, striking off in what he estimated was the direction of Pleasantville. When they had put several groves and hills between themselves and his recent prison place, his companion called a halt.

"Which way, now?" inquired the stranger.

"I am going to Pleasantville," said Nat.

"Are you? Why, this is strange—so am I. Hum! I say, by the way, didn't you say you'd make my little help something to me?"

"I did," replied Nat promptly, "and I will." He drew out his own little pocketbook. It held several bank notes and some small change.

"There's ten dollars," he said, proffering the bills.

The man took them, greedily, too. An expression of satisfaction crossed his face.

"Well," he observed, "you've made good royally. It's the first time I remember a layout of the kind panning out anything substantial like this."

"You don't know how you are welcome to it," declared Nat.

The man fumbled the bank notes rather irresolutely.

"See here," he said, "you're only a boy, and ten dollars must be a whole lot to you."

"And my liberty is a whole lot more to me," asserted Nat. "Now," as the man made a movement to give back a part of the money, "it's worth every cent of it. I mean it, you must keep that money."

"It comes in good, I can tell you," said the man. "I suppose you sort of wonder about my being a traveling tool shop, eh?"

"It's a fortunate thing for me that you are," responded Nat; but he was curious to have the man explain, which his companion proceeded to do.

"I was a burglar once," he confessed frankly.

"Oh!" said Nat.

"Shocks you? I don't wonder. It's the truth. Too dangerous to keep at it; though I'm harmless now, except for a bite to eat or a locked barn to break into when I want to camp for the night."

"I see," nodded Nat.

"I keep those tools about me, because—well, they come in handy for honest purposes once in a while, see?"

"I do see it very plainly in my case," declared Nat heartily.

"Do you live at Pleasantville?" inquired the man, with a glance of interest at Nat.

"Yes, I was born there."

"Know a man called Colonel Harrington?"

"Oh, yes, I know him very well."

"Rich, isn't he?"

"They say he is one of the wealthiest men in the county."

"That makes me feel good," said the stranger quickly.

Nat regarded his companion curiously, but the latter made no further revelations along the same line of information. He did not ask Nat any questions in detail as to the cause of his imprisonment in the old deserted farmhouse. They proceeded along for some miles together, and the only break in the silence was when the stranger, who seemed to be thinking deeply, made some inquiry about the Pleasantville magnate.

As they reached the vicinity of the mills up the river, the man sat down to rest on a bench outside of a roadhouse.

"I'm going to get a good meal," he said, "and tidy up a bit. Join me in a fine dinner, won't you?"

"I am anxious to get back to my friends," dissented Nat. "When you go to Pleasantville keep right down this main road. It goes past a new subdivision called North Pleasantville. That is

where I am working. If I can do anything to show my appreciation of your kindness at any time, just call on me."

"Thanks," responded the man; "but I shall put from the town as soon as I get what I came after."

"Ever been at Pleasantville before?" inquired Nat casually.

"Only one time—years ago," returned his companion evasively. "What's your name, now?"

"Borden—Nat Borden."

"Why!" exclaimed the man forcibly. Then he sat stiff upright, and stared at Nat in the queerest way in the world.

"What is the matter?" asked the surprised Nat.

"Oh, nothing—nothing," replied the other, but his eyes roved about in a speculative, disturbed way that Nat could not help but note.

"Well, I must be on my way," said Nat. "Say, mister, I feel pretty friendly towards you when I think of your setting me free from that horrible confinement."

"Yes, yes," muttered the man in an abstracted way, as if he had something very serious on his mind. "Borden, eh? And a likely boy. Gave me ten dollars. Good-by, Borden."

Nat shook hands with the man. He did it

slowly, somehow believing that this man could tell him something of importance if he wanted to, and wondered what it might be.

The man let him go. As Nat reached the middle of the road, however, he hailed him:

"Oh, say, Borden——" and paused suddenly.

"What is it, sir?" inquired Nat, turning back eagerly.

"Why—er—oh, I just wanted to say I may drop in and see you at your subdivision."

"All right; I will be glad to see you," rejoined Nat.

He put down the road alone now on a fast sprint. Nat soon forgot about his recent companion. A thought of his restoration to liberty, of his anxieties, mother and friends, urged him forward on wings of fleetness.

As he came in sight of the office, the young land agent made a short cut across Colonel Harrington's land.

The office door was open. Nat ran up the steps. Seated at the desk, his arms outstretched across it and his face pillowed in them, as if asleep or exhausted, was Jack Harwell.

"Jack, Jack, old fellow!" shouted Nat in a great transport of excitement and joy, "wake up!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE STOLEN DEED

NAT realized that he had at least one ardent, loyal friend in the world as Jack Harwell raised his head, gasped, sprang to his feet and grasped his hand. Jack was fairly hysterical. He was not ashamed to shed tears of such brotherly gladness and delight that the young land agent was touched infinitely.

"I've hardly slept, I've not eaten much. It's been a dream of misery all the time," declared faithful Jack. "I saw the business going to pieces, but they wouldn't let me resign."

"Resign? Nonsense!" said Nat; "for a little thing like this."

"Oh, you don't know!" cried Jack; "the whole town is interested. It's been in the papers. I was just getting ready to run away."

"What for?"

"To search for you, Nat. You were kidnapped?"

"Yes, Jack."

"By Colonel Harrington?"

"No."

"By his emissaries, then?"

"No, again. It's a long story. You shall hear it in due time. Just now there is something else to attend to. First, call up my mother."

"You bet I will!" shouted Jack, with joyous alacrity, springing to the telephone.

"Just say Nat will be home for supper at the usual time."

Just those words Jack repeated, as there was a reply to his call at the other end of the line. Then:

"Yes, Mrs. Borden, alive and well. Oh, no, not hurt a bit. Yes, ma'am, he'll surely be home for supper. No, ma'am, he hasn't told me yet, but he got—er—sort of delayed."

"You did that finely," commended Nat with a smile. "Now, then I must get to town and see Mr. Chase at once. Is he in town?"

"Yes, at the hotel office; but pretty gloomy when I saw him this morning."

Nat reached the hotel an hour later. He had tried to evade meeting friends and giving explanations, but it was no use. Stet ran into him coming around a corner.

"Sufferin' succotash!" he yelled, "look at the spook!"

Then, reassured, he fairly dragged Nat to the office of the *Herald*. The news spread like wildfire. When Nat reached the hotel office Mr. Chase had heard of his safe return, and was ready to greet him, relieved of the shock of a sudden unexpected appearance.

To his employer Nat confidentially related all that had happened to him. He found an interested auditor. It was with an emotion of glad relief that Nat turned over the checks and money received at the sale of lots at the subdivision on opening day.

"Now, then," said Mr. Chase grimly, putting on his hat and seizing his cane with a certain definiteness of purpose that somewhat startled his young employee, "to make Colonel Harrington back water on his statements of your embezzlement in the *Bugle*."

"I wouldn't take the trouble, Mr. Chase," advised Nat; "the situation will clear itself."

"A retraction is only the beginning of this business," declared Mr. Chase firmly. "It will be followed by the confession of Jack Ducro, which I have secured, giving all the details of the plot to prove you guilty of stealing Colonel Har-

rington's pocketbook. You go home, Borden. That good mother of yours has the first right to see you."

It was near dusk the following evening, and the day had been a busy one, when Nat, about to leave the subdivision for the night, looked quickly around as the door was pushed open suddenly.

"It's me, Borden," spoke a familiar voice, and its owner staggered across the floor and into a chair, with the added words: "Let me rest for a minute, I have something to tell you."

"Why," exclaimed Nat, "what has happened to you?"

The unexpected visitor Nat had, at once, recognized. He was the man who had rescued him from the lonely farmhouse where Perry had held him a prisoner.

The man presented a startling appearance. His face was a mass of bruises. His eyes were nearly closed from black and blue contusions, and his whole appearance suggested a person who had indulged unduly in strong drink and had received a terrible fistic punishment.

"Don't be scared or shocked, Borden," said the man after a moment or two. "It's simply the mournful example for the hundredth time in my life."

"I am very sorry," said Nat soberly.

"I got a little more than I deserved this time, though," continued the man, "so I thought I'd leave town this way to see you, before I bade goodby to your pleasant burg."

"How did you receive your injuries?" asked Nat.

"From a gang. A gang bossed by your town boss, Harrington," declared the man. "Friend of yours?" inquired the speaker, with a nod towards Jack, who stood regarding the intruder in open-mouthed wonderment.

"My very best friend, yes."

"Then I can talk freely?"

"Of course."

"All right. As I told you, I am a bad one. You treated me square, and if I had met a few more like you, maybe I would be different. You know that I have been a burglar. Well, I'd dropped that play, and for the first time in five years really was on my way to pay some decent relatives a visit. A stray thought sent me out of my course to visit Pleasantville. It was to see if I could work a little cash out of your Colonel Harrington."

"Why?" inquired Nat.

"I didn't tell you the other day," said the man,

"but the minute you spoke your name I was ashamed of myself."

"Again, why?" persisted Nat, wondering at the peculiar disclosures of his visitor.

"Because you had been liberal and fair with me, had given me what must be a small fortune to a boy like you, and because what I had in mind to do was a mean, treacherous thing for a fellow to do under the circumstance; I went straight ahead, though. I went to Colonel Harrington. The gist of the matter is that I passed through Pleasantville some years ago. A house was on fire at the time—your house—the Borden home. I pretended to help carry out the furniture. In reality I was looking for a chance to steal something. I got my hands on a little tin box, and made off with it."

"I think I am beginning to understand now," said Nat thoughtfully. "The neighbors described a tall, dark-featured man."

"That was me," confessed the man. "When I came to open the box I found nothing of value in it, except a deed. I saw that it hadn't been recorded; I saw the name of Harrington as the grantor, and that of Crimmins as a witness. Well, I thought I saw the chance to pick up a few dollars. I went to find Harrington. He was out of

town. I went up to the old Crimmins house, north of town. I played the cunning old skeesicks fine, partly on what I guessed as to the value of the deed. He gave me one hundred dollars."

"And probably got ten times that amount from Colonel Harrington," remarked Nat indignantly.

"I don't think so, from what Colonel Harrington let out yesterday," said the man. "At all events, I thought I'd drop in on Crimmins this time and try and bleed him for more money. I found him away, and his house shut up for a month. Then I went to Harrington. He pretended he wanted to think over my threat that if he didn't give me fifty dollars I would blab to the whole town about the stolen deed. He got me to go away with some spy of his, who got me intoxicated. This afternoon the fellow ran me into a vile drinking den, where his mob beat me up, as you see, and said they would swear some heavy crime on me, and get me sent to the penitentiary, if I didn't get out of town and stay away from town. Then I thought of you. Lad," said the man earnestly, "I'm a bad, bad rascal, but it isn't altogether spite and revenge against that cad, Harrington, that brought me here. I want to right a wrong."

"About the deed, you mean?" asked Nat.

"Yes. What I propose is this: You, and your friend here, if you like, come with me up to Crimmins' house, and I'll try and find that deed."

Old Crimmins had lived like a hermit about three miles from Pleasantville. Nat and Jack accompanied the man across country to the home of the miser.

"I thought you said the house was unoccupied and closed up?" said Nat, as they reached the isolated place. "There is a light in the kitchen."

"That's so," said the stranger. "Here," to Jack, "creep up cautiously and see who's there."

In about two minutes Jack returned with the whispered report:

"It's Colonel Harrington and his bulldog."

"Colonel Harrington is here, you say," asked the stranger.

"Yes, and his bulldog," replied Jack.

"He has forestalled us, suspects what we know, and is in possession," said Nat.

"Otherwise," said the man, "from my loose talk he guesses that the deed we are after is in this house somewhere. Keep in the shadow, lads. I'll take a glance at the outfit myself."

The man crept along the house, and Nat and Jack watched him hover about the window. Soon he returned.

"H'm!" he said. "We are just in time, if not too early."

"How is that?" inquired Nat.

"Harrington has a lot of botch tools. It looks to me as if he found his bungling tools wouldn't break into some place he has discovered, and has sent for others, see?"

Nat nodded.

"Very good. That gives me a cue. When I came here and sold that deed to old Crimmins, I noticed that he put it in a wall pocket that had a spring lock. See here, you, Borden's friend, stay on guard, watch Harrington, and signal us if his friends appear."

"All right," agreed Jack.

The man led the way around to the other side of the house, produced a small steel tool, pried open a pair of shutters, then forced up a window, and the next minute Nat stood in a dark room beside him. He drew out a small dark lantern and cast its radiance all around the room.

"That's the place," he said, focusing its rays on a piece of metal set in above a mantel.

In two minutes he had opened the door to the steel wall pocket.

"Closer with the light," ordered the man in a cautious tone. "Now, then, look 'em over."

One by one he handed out envelopes and packages of documents. Nat read their labels, examined their contents. At last a glad cry arose.

"Found it?" inquired his companion.

"Yes, yes," replied Nat, with sparkling eyes; "oh, what don't I owe you for this lucky find!"

Nat held in his hand the long missing document—the deed to the pasture lot that would make his mother independent for life.

Silently as they had come, the trio stole away from the vicinity of the old Crimmins home. As they came to the railway station near the mills, the man who had restored to the young land agent a fortune, held out his hand.

"Good-by, Borden," he said simply; "I'll get to my relatives, see how a spell among honest home folks strikes me, and if I find I can be straight and honest I'll come back and ask you to get a job for me."

"At least take this to help you on your way," said Nat, pressing a little roll of bills into the man's hand. "Please write me; please come back and let me help you all I can."

"Good-by, I won't forget you," said the man, walking rapidly away.

"Is that you, Borden?" called Mr. Chase over the subdivision phone to the town office of the

Riverview Land Co., where Nat and Jack had been busy putting up some circulars.

"Yes, sir," replied the young land agent.

"Is Harwell with you?"

Nat again responded in the affirmative.

"Drop everything," came the sharp order. "Bring Harwell with you, and get down to the subdivision at once."

"I wonder what's up?" queried Jack, as he put on his cap and accompanied Nat to the street.

"I can't imagine," responded Nat.

They passed the men busy at work and entered the office, to find their employer impatiently awaiting them.

"You sent for us, Mr. Chase?" began Nat.

"Yes, for Harwell particularly. Young man," he addressed Jack, "do you recognize this?"

As he spoke he lifted from under the desk a battered, corroded tin box. Across its top was a name painted in white letters, "Harwell."

"Why!" almost shouted Jack, "that is the box that held the bulk of the stock of my father's jewelry stock—the valuable part, the diamonds, and all that."

"Look here," continued Mr. Chase.

He threw back the cover of the box. It was

filled with glittering gems, rings, watches and gold coins.

"What does it mean?" asked Nat in amazement.

"Your story of the dead tramp, Hastings, and the man with the divining rod, Perry, set me thinking," said Mr. Chase. "We had to have a sewer here somewhere, so I selected a line 'twenty feet from the fence.' The steam digger turned up this box a short time since."

"Oh, how things are coming out! And, oh! to think that my father can go into business again!" cried Jack Harwell, fairly overcome.

A few days later Farmer Sollitt came to Pleasantville, to leave at the Borden home the little lost packet the tramp, Hastings, had given to Nat the night he died. It had been found in the shelter shed of the mule, where Nat and Mr. Chase were lost in the snowstorm the night they first met.

It seemed that one of the burglars of the Harwell jewelry store, dying in prison, had told Hastings how, chased by the police, he had thrown the box of jewelry into a ditch, "twenty feet from the fence" on the Marvin estate.

He had thrown some loose dirt over the box, and, unhampered, had escaped, but before he

could go back for the box, had been jailed for another crime.

Before this burglar died, he had also given his old accomplice, Perry, a hint as to the disposition of the jewelry.

Immediately after the hiding of the box, the old landmark, the fence, had been torn down, and the ditch filled in to prepare for subdividing the land, and all the trace of the exact whereabouts of the box had become confused, Hastings and Perry only knowing in a general way that it was "twenty feet from the fence."

The Saturday night after this latest grateful discovery, Nat's friends held a pleasant party at the Borden home. Mr. Chase was there, the Haven boys, Stet, Ned Procter, Frank Newton and Nelson Cady.

Mrs. Borden had proven her claim to the old pasture lot. It was discovered that Colonel Harrington had just negotiated its sale for a very large amount to the railroad company, who wanted to build a bridge over the river, and the widow was assured a modest fortune.

It looked as if everybody in town knew of the confession of Jack Ducro, revealing the plot to defame the name of the young land agent.

They knew also the details of the stolen deed

episode. The colonel's pet paper, the *Bugle,* blew just one blast after its meek apology for calling Nat Borden an embezzler, and then died a natural death.

Colonel Harrington did not run for the legislature. Instead, he did run for "important business interests in the West."

"I understand the tract north of us, that was to have been Harringtonville, is in the market," observed Mr. Chase.

"Well, with a little filling and grading and honest management," said Darry Haven, "it might become a respectable addition to North Pleasantville."

"Pleasantville—well named!" declared the Springfield man exuberantly. "Borden, that was a lucky time for me, the day I met you on the snowbound train."

So we leave them, a joyful coterie of plucky business boys, who had made industry their motive and truth their principle.

THE END